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The Farm Crisis: A Personal View

THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

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June 1985
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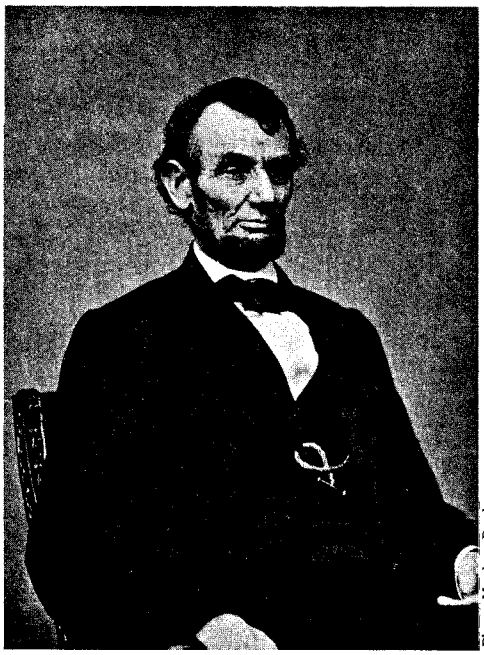

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EDITORIAL NOTE.

The publishers of the North American Review have had the honor of receiving the following letter from the President of the United States.

"Executive Mansion,
Washington, January 16, 1864.

"Messrs. Crosby and Nichols:–

"Gentlemen: The number for this month and year of the North American Review was duly received, and for which please accept my thanks. Of course I am not the most impartial judge; yet, with due allowance for this, I venture to hope that the article entitled 'The President's Policy' will be of value to the country. I fear I am not quite worthy of all which is therein kindly said of me personally.

"The sentence of twelve lines, commencing at the top of page 252, I could wish to be not exactly as it is. In what is there expressed, the writer has not correctly understood me. I have never had a theory that Secession could absolve States or people from their obligations. Precisely the contrary is asserted in the Inaugural Address; and it was because of my belief in the continuation of these obligations, that I was puzzled, for a time, as to denying the legal rights of those citizens who remained individually innocent of treason or rebellion. But I mean no more now than to merely call attention to this point.

"Yours respectfully,

"A. Lincoln."

[Nothing could have been further from the intention of the Editors than to misrepresent the opinions of the President. They merely meant that, in their judgment, the policy of the Administration was at first such as practically to concede to any rebel who might choose to profess loyalty, rights under the Constitution whose corresponding obligations he repudiated.]

From The North American Review, April 1864

Since 1815, no magazine in America has had a readership more distinguished or a literary history more rich than THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW. Now available at newsstands, as well as by subscription.

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A Letter to Our Audience

The house lights go up, the audience leaves for the streets, but the drama continues, for we struggle for more than our lives.

If life ends, theatre dies. All art, from Bach to Brancusi, Beethoven to Beckett, Mozart to Motherwell. Gone. Where art is playful, painful, sometimes fun, sometimes risky, death is boring. Endless. Without echoes.

We knew that in 1955 when we refused to take part in Nelson Rockefeller's "Civil Defense" drills. We went to jail—and members of War Resisters League were jailed with us.

Some have said the Living Theatre is "avant garde." Sure. Of course. It just means being a little early.

In 1961, we looked at the horror of coming nuclear war and tried to organize a General Strike for Peace. WRL members were part of that.

When we were among the thousands jamming Times Square to protest nuclear tests in 1962, War Resisters League was there—and helped, as always, to organize the action.

A lot of you were in Central Park on June 12th, 1982—many groups made that possible, but it was War Resisters League that got that ball rolling starting planning a year ahead.

When the Vietnam War came, War Resisters League did more than protest. They organized mass demonstrations before that was popular or safe.

When others called the men in the military "baby killers," WRL reached out a hand and said, "Brothers . . . . do not kill."

When Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged racism in the South, War Resisters League staff was with him both in planning strategy, and in jail.

We need these people. They are experimenting with nonviolence and how it might change our society, our world. Some critics think War Resisters League is avant garde. It is. It always has been.

Art, theatre, living—they are all linked. War Resisters League isn't free of bureaucrats. But they have fewer of them.

You can help, in this dangerous moment of history, by sending off a check to them. Money helps.

More important, you can join the avant garde. Join the League. Social change is art, it is playful, serious, sometimes risky. But never boring.

Julian Beck Judith Malina

Julian Beck/Judith Malina

☐ Yes, I want to support the work of the War Resisters League.
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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Situated in what used to be called the American Heartland, we find ourselves also at the heart of the farm crisis. Bad weather, a strong dollar, high interest rates, plummeting land values, low commodity prices, overproduction—these, in no special order, are some of the circumstances that over the past few years have concatenated to make farming riskier than ever. Michael Martone, whose real metier is the writing of fiction, went to a family farm in Iowa for a weekend of unaccustomed work and considerable revelation. His non-fiction and splendidly personal account of that visit begins on page nine.

A few readers have confronted us on the subject of The Four-Minute Short Story, arguing that in fact not many of the stories can actually be read in four minutes. To which charge we shrug and disclaim—adding as an afterthought that not every pianist can play the Minute Waltz in one minute. A new batch of short fictions appears in this issue—enjoyable, we trust, at any speed.

It's worth noting (because we pride ourselves on variety) that much of the fiction in this Summer Fiction number is by newcomers to the NAR. Jenny Stone Humphries, Erin McGraw, Patricia Stoll, Michael Plemmons, Deborah Stewart, and Scott Purdin all appear here for the first time.

Some books of interest to NAR readers: *Greasy Lake & Other Stories*, by T. Coraghessan Boyle (Viking); *Tentacles of Unreason*, stories by Joan Givner (Illinois); *Angels*, by Denis Johnson (Knopf); *Museum Pieces*, by Elizabeth Tallent (Knopf); *The Eudaemonic Pie*, by Thomas A. Bass (Houghton Mifflin); *New Faces of 1952*, by Maxine Chernoff (Ithaca House); *Sunrise with Sea Monsters*, by Paul Theroux (Houghton Mifflin).

Finally, alas: please note that the price of the NAR will rise to $3 a copy, $11 a year in the U.S.—effective December 1st.

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THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

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POETRY EDITOR
Peter Cooley

ART DIRECTOR
James Buckels

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Margaret Atwood
Roy R. Behrens
David Hellerstein
Leo J. Hertzel
Kenneth Lash
Barry Lopez
Stephen Minot
Mary Peterson
Scott Russell Sanders
Lawrence Sturhahn

BUSINESS MANAGER
Charlotte L. Wilson

EDITORIAL &
BUSINESS OFFICES:

University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614

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A Day at the Museum of Modern Art

KENNETH LASH

I find museums forbidding and hard on the feet. My preference is to see sculpture in a park or *piazza*, murals in a church or workplace or on a fence, a painting (preferably only one) on somebody's wall. It's a matter of breathing space, for both of us. Having said which, let me commemorate a breathless day in April at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

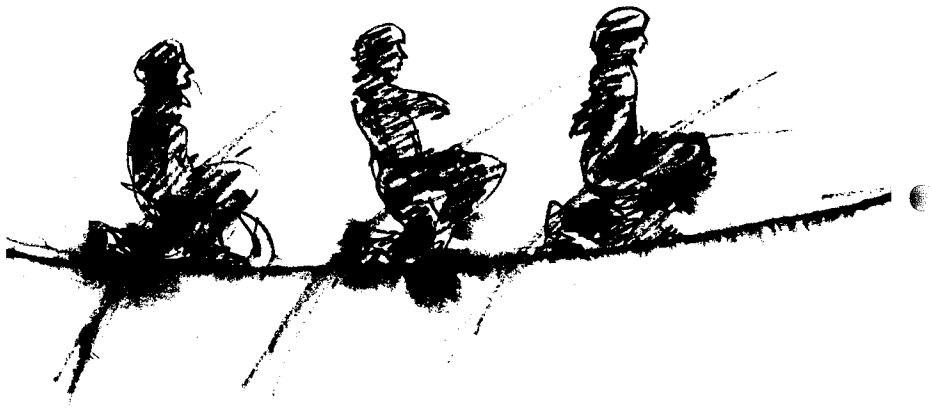
MOMA was doing wonderfully what only some form of museum can do—collect, recollect, overwhelm. Featured were shows of paintings by Henri Rousseau, drawings by Henri Matisse, and photographs by Eugène Atget. A French triple-header of World Series rank and proportion. I tried to leave at noon after a full morning but couldn't. Went to the cafeteria (stood in line), sat at a table with a woman with body by Rubens and facial expression by Daumier. She had laid out in front of and occasionally on top of her plate a series of those folding slick-paper brochures. These were for a variety of New York City tours. She said she couldn't decide between the World Trade Center, the Battery, or what sounded like a mixed grill of assorted sights. Thinking to be friendly, or rather good-deedy (perhaps suggest the Staten Island ferry or Manhattan boat-tour), I asked where she lived, trying not to sound as if I expected a proximate answer of Garden City, Kansas. She said, 55th Street in Manhattan. End of friendly chat. I couldn't cope with her; the three artists were more than enough.

Starting my second round exactly as the first (in case the later should have something to say about the earlier), I went to the rooms of Rousseau. The green rooms. Even the air was green from all that jungle growth, except where it was momentarily back-lit blue where the striped gypsy slept in the moonlight. There was so much greenery that standing in front of, I think, "The Hungry Lion," and looking away for a moment, I saw a real plant sitting there in the corner, one chosen for its family resemblance to the painted plants of Rousseau. The real one looked unreal. And then unwanted, left there on the doorstep of these Rousseau paintings. And so might have begun a dialogue on the "real." For example, the Museum chronology notes, "The majority of Rousseau's exotic canvasses are inspired by visits to the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris and by illustrations in books and magazines." So much for the real versus fantasy and dream, or rather for the notion that there is a versus, but I didn't want to sidetrack into thinking about them when I was here seeing them.

It isn't that seeing is believing, it's that seeing is *seeing*. Not the painting alone, but what the painting has seen. I don't know how much of that was going on around me, but one thing that certainly was going on was a lot of smiling. These gorgeous imaginings were making people smile (those naive or knowing enough to permit themselves to smile in a museum, to break the straight face of the true appreciator). I wondered why we couldn't help grinning at painting that often included beasts at their bloody breakfasts, but I think I knew. One grins at delight. Rousseau's work, like Mirò's highly sophisticated but with deep ties to the childworld, offers a pure form of delight.

There were also smiles and grins at the Matisse show ("the first comprehensive survey of the drawings of Henri Matisse ever to be presented in New York"), but they were more active, outgoing, even childlike looks of delight. Everybody seemed to be moving hands and arms and wrists, reproducing in air the swirl and surge of Matisse's line as if the energetic joy of it—no, as if what was beaming out from the drawings was the natural, signature of form, naturally recognized and responded to, joined with. The wavings were dancelike, rhythmical. For a moment it was as if we were, without knowing, posing for Matisse cut-outs. Had he been there to see it, his response must surely have been, "Ah, that's good, what they're doing." Matisse's work is a blessing. It seems a simple blessing because it is more gesture than speech. And because it's a universal gesture, like hand language.

There was a stillness in Atget's photographs something akin to Rousseau. Perhaps because they're so self-sufficient, so complete. And, as a friend of mine says, "right there." They don't seem to need anything else, or to have anything much said about them. People were peering rather than talking. They kept pushing their noses right up to the work, as if looking for the (carefully omitted) detail, or as if trying to determine where the quiet force came from. How did he do it, this wall, that shopkeeper, this window? It has everything that self-conscious pho-



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tography has not. As if nobody took these pictures. As if nothing merely spectacular needed to be preserved. Movement stops, sound is turned off, and we are presented with forms in stillness.

There's something profound about stillness. We've all felt it, and it doesn't require mountain tops—alone in the backyard on a starry night will do. "A profound silence," we say. Silence, stillness have to do with eternal form. Perhaps (frighteningly) *are* eternal form.

There is an absolute stillness in Rousseau's imagined jungle. There are birds, beasts, people, and no more movement, no more weather, than in the geometry of Uccello's famous battle scenes at San Romano. I thought, when I was outside the museum, back regretfully in my world of connective idea, about the Florentine painters, of their infatuation with problems of form, and the Renaissance habit of regarding these problems as bound up with equivalent problems in science, philosophy, history. Working their heads off to discover, imagine, fantasize universal form in space, and to render it so still it becomes both a picture of the space and space itself. Piero della Francesca.

Noisiness seems to me a great flaw in painting. It deforms all the propaganda works of state and self. The best of religious painting has to soar past its sloganeering. That Giotto blue. But those soundless paintings of Hopper for example, to which I respond helplessly, are loud in their desolation. I feel more force where it hardly seems to exist—the quiet paintings of Cézanne, Avery, Diebenkorn. But then, I like quiet a lot.

For the Matisse drawings my head took me to Japan, their investigations into line and curve and Oriental economy and so forth and so forth. I still didn't want to think about those drawings. I wanted to own a few and dance to them. Like a graduate music student I once heard about, who for his "thesis" performance entered the examination room and, pointing to a brick wall, played it.

For thinking there remained that woman with her tour brochures spread out on a table in the cafeteria of the Museum of Modern Art. *Chacun à son* trip? Time hangs heavy? Lost Horizon? Still, MOMA was on her itinerary. She'd have made a very noisy painting. □

SUMMER 1985 ISSUE

On Being a Writer
Norman Mailer
A Long Interview with Arthur Miller
Faulkner in Russia
Joseph Blotner
Hemingway and Steinbeck: A Tale of Two Writers
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South Africa: Notes in Progress

D. E. STEWARD

All over southern Africa eucalyptus are planted along roadsides and as fence lines across the veld, and their high, strapping grace is dominant enough in some places to cover the fields and lanes with the dryness of their leaves, cups and shedding bark so thickly that the very water they hold from the periodic rains seems permanently trapped far below in their roots—leaving the surface soil even drier than it would be if they had never been introduced and found to flourish there. Between the old brown highway leading out around False Bay and the beachfront park in Strand in the Western Cape is a long file of them where people often sit waiting for their relatives and friends to be dismissed from the magistrate's court just across the way. On the way to the airport out back of the Cape Flats there was at one time an impressive double avenue of huge old eucalyptus, then they were taken out to make room for the four-lane carriageway that leads now like a vast alluvial fan up to the airport gate. All over the Rand, eucalyptus was planted between the mine dumps' artificial mountains to provide timbers for the mine supports—strange, shabby eucalyptus parks, netherworlds of it in the gray-shade dust of the tired, massive heaps of slag. In the Eastern Free State, random eucalyptus often mark the water courses and the pockets in the hills where below the krans there is no room to graze or farm. Where the Orange River cuts across the Northern Cape, in places there are lines of eucalyptus planted on the rocky, sandy banks. There are grand eucalyptus shading the smooth packed red-dirt marketplace in Mbabane, and clusters of smaller ones along the lower approach to the Pigg's Peak border-post crossing to the Transvaal from Swaziland. And in the Transvaal lowveld there are eucalyptus all along the railroad siding in Komati Poort. All grow very rapidly and from year to year even seem to appear where there were none before, and, like everything significant or ubiquitous in southern Africa, their poignant strength of character is peculiarly somehow stronger in recollection than when one is actually there.

For me, crying in the Cape Town wind was a humble and private quiet act in the face of all that space. The sand haze blowing up from the strand, that endless strand, made me feel small and clean, and utterly sad. Even thinking about the Southern Hemisphere should make us all feel small, leave us in a scale more fitting to our place within the universe than these northern coasts on which we crowd, these bucal fringes of our heavily-peopled northern world. Off there in the far South Atlantic, the Cape Doctor, the ceaseless Cape Town wind, overawes the largest things of human kind. It is so vast there that a few years ago when a satellite designed to watchdog for atomic blasts saw the South Africans let one go, either one of Israel's or one of their own, no one was even sure what it was. Through it all the weather rolled on, wide spaces on the oceanic charts were studied then forgotten, the currents swung, as through the centuries. Oh, how I used to cry in that wind down there for so much injustice within all that beauty place, so much alone.

Those who live there, and those who know, were saying before the Port Elizabeth shootings that apparently it was already a very close thing at the time of Soweto nine years ago—that if the army had not been there, and had been off in Angola, as indeed it was two months later, the government would have lost it then and there at home during the Soweto Riots; that if the army had not been there, the riots would have spread and ignited everywhere. Until the 1985 uprisings around Port Elizabeth, South Africans met on airplanes were saying things like, "The next time something like Soweto happens, no matter what forces the government has there, the whole thing could actually fall apart." Asked repeatedly if they were sure of that, they would answer, "Oh yes! Soweto was *that close.*"

Whites sleep a great deal in South Africa, and spend a lot of time looking at their shoes. Cheerful resignation. How anyone who knows South Africa should hate cheerful resignation! Better bitter resignation than cheerful resignation. Better anything than all that touching cheerful resignation.

Chilled and nodding as though perhaps unwilling (or it could be that they are and were and will be readily perhaps not unwilling) approvers of the government they scorned enough to flee. White. Why is all so white in South Africa? Black there still lacks a unitary face simply because it is a country where people live gloriously within themselves and their private lives, and is not a polarization of political definitions and concerns. But why? Why do whites invariably think white safety first and last of all? Because for most of them, the rest of the people in their country are not people at all.

On a road near Grahamstown the other day, a petrol bomb went through the windscreen of a white's car towing a pleasure boat. The driver fled and both boat and car were burned out. The owner was going home with it, the way he always did after a day of pleasure fishing on Algoa Bay. Port Elizabeth is an elongated city about the size of Basel, Switzerland. The sunlight is somehow brighter in the Eastern Cape than in Cape Town to the West. There has always been a glare, a dry expectancy about the place.

The Botha Government had been a reformist régime, until Spring 1985. Clearly, the decisions are being made right now in Pretoria, and even within parliamentary committees in

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Cape Town, as to whether or not the time for any concession to reforms is past. After Vorster was replaced, and to a degree even before, there apparently was a willingness on the part of the Nats to play a new kind of realpolitik. One of the most telling truisms about the history of revolutions is that they always begin when the government in power is on a reformist swing. This is the case for at least two reasons: The victims of an unjust government get a taste and become willing to extend for more. Reform would never be launched by any sort of absolutist régime unless it recognized a clear and present need for reform to stanch the chance of serious uprisings, and of course by the time such a régime judges that reform is necessary, well . . . Anyway, here we are, as though just at the beginning instead of almost home, finish and clear—which is about where I would have guessed we would be in 1985 when I left the Republic in August, 1964. Another generation gone, ground down fine and lean by apartheid. The word is current again; until a few months ago the Nats had almost succeeded in easing it out of the international lexicon.

It would be interesting to know how many whites are going about getting ready to leave now, and exactly where the ones who are dead serious about it are drawing their decision line—in other words, what they are deeming worth it to abandon in order to get out. "We can always sell the car, at the airport if necessary. It won't be that easy, of course, with the house. But there's no doubt in my mind that we should set a date, make our airline reservations, and then go about preparing to leave on that date no matter what the status of our real estate and no matter how little or how much of our bank accounts we have managed by that time to transfer or smuggle out. If things are looking up by the week we're due to leave, then we can always cancel out. Are you agreed? And of course there's nothing to be gained at all in telling anyone else about any of this. I guess we'll have to break the news to the children a day or two before."

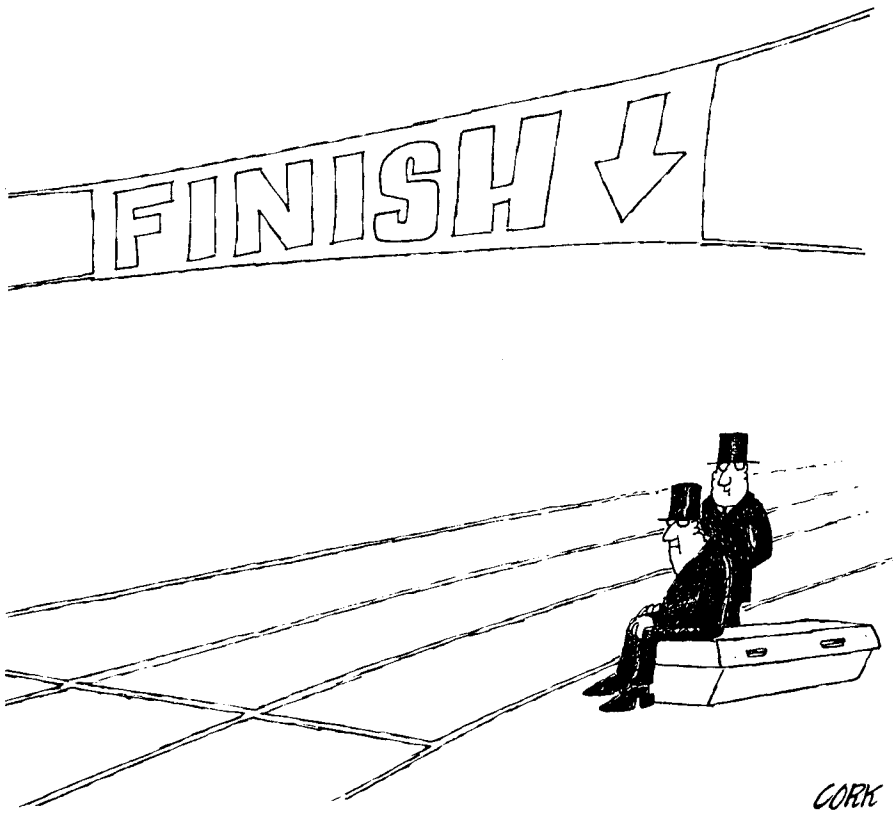
To where? Well, that's another question in itself.

R.F. Botha sits in the Houses of Parliament in Cape Town—three of them now; the Asian members sit in a chamber that until a few months ago was an inner courtyard which has been roofed over, spruced up, with benches added—drumming his fingers on his desk. He is the government minister with the intense, level, lupine stare who was interviewed on the first of the five ABC "Nightline" programs broadcast to the United States from the Republic this spring. That those broadcasts, pitting even ANC people into confrontational situations with government ministers and the like, came the same week as the Langa shootings on the anniversary of Sharpville, was an extraordinary conjunction in itself.

The week after the American television program had opened windows never before opened in the Republic, something like thirty-seven white (probably Afrikaner, judging from the sketchy news report) high school kids were killed when their school bus went off one of those huge and lonely hydroelectric and irrigation-scheme dams in the Transvaal. One of those dams with red rock and depthless hot, blue sky, one of those immense Transvaal projects that looks as though it was plopped down by the engineers of another planet somewhere nearby but high and far. How the increasingly paranoid Afrikaners must have thought the event of that school bus accident had some sort of strange linkage to the other things that had just been happening!

There was no television at all in South Africa until a few years ago, let alone the kind of television ABC was able to loose in the Republic this spring. The Nats had reasoned all along, probably correctly, that it would be a genie of revolution once let out of the bag. Their fears were proven justified because even the SABC got crossed by the event of the broadcasts to America this spring when they decided to go ahead and air excerpts themselves, selectively. They announced, and then got burned by the intensity of the whole thing.

There is tremendous excitement in the townships, tremendous. Just as during the Soweto Riots nine years ago, the older people try to hold the younger back, but this time, everybody feels that there is going to be no turning back. If there were any strain of fanaticism loose in the townships comparable to that in Iran or even to that among the PLO in Lebanon, all the armored personnel carriers in the world could do nothing. □



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RICHARD CUMMINS

THE SUPPLICATION

Sometimes when I came home from school my grandmother would be waiting
Behind the door with her teeth out and her hair mussed, her eyes
Dangling above her cheeks like two crazy tops with uncoiled springs.
She'd chase me around the house like someone from a fairy tale
Until, at last, cornering me in the bathroom, she'd flick the light
On and off, on and off, cackling like a witch circling above my crying.

Then she'd start laughing, her wizened apple-face crying
With delight at what a baby I was, as if childhood is a waiting
Room for the grown-up horrors behind *any* door, or the harsh light
You stare into on a pool of water, drowning in light until the eyes
Begin to sting and bleed, until you know the heart's darkest tale.
My father, home from work or the track, would stare into that same spring

And draw new energy from it, and like winter budding into spring,
Would run to his mother-in-law's door, shouting and crying—
Hey, Maggie . . . you old bitch, come out of there off your fat tail
And let me tell you something, you old bitch—his eyes
Glowing with the anger of failure turned outward, the kind of anger waiting
For something to kill not in darkness but in cold daylight.

Inside, my grandmother would shout *Go away*! and turn off her light.
My father would press his ear against the door, hear the bedsprings
Creak under her weight, hear the mumbling over rosary beads. His eyes
Would glisten with victory as he heard the supplication become wild crying,
The uncontrolled sobbings of age and misery. Then he'd eat, just waiting
For her to emerge after having told her god her tragic tale,

As if any good Catholic would be happy for this cross, this headlong tail-
Spin into the fat, black face of suffering. He'd made her see the light,
Had done her a Christian favor by showing her that the devil is always waiting
On the periphery of the soul, waiting for that moment to spring
Into the light and leave his victim prostrate, gnashing and crying
Like a child to his stupid, ineffective god, screaming *I I I I*,

With all the misery of despair rolling liquid from his eyes.
And my mother would tell her god a similar tale
Of *I* about what happened that day my father came home crying
Maggie! Maggie! and my grandmother saw the light
Failing in her window as she clutched her heart, fell on the springs
Of the bed, with her soul ready for her god but pausing, waiting

For the ultimate victory as she saw in his eyes as he stood in her light
The horror, his tale now one of murder and guilt as he sprang
To her side, crying *Maggie, wait! I was just kidding, I was just kidding. . . .*

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"I wonder if the rest of the country doesn't think of the Midwest as they would think of their local cemetery. Both are even landscaped the same—not too hilly, few sturdy trees, plastic flowers. People who don't live here are kind of proud that they can't be bothered with sorting out the I states—Iowa, Illinois, Indiana. They lose track of the family plots in the same way. Out of sight, out of mind. . . . The Midwest busies itself with changing the living into the dead, the dead into the living."

MICHAEL MARTONE

PULLING THINGS BACK TO EARTH

"There's one," Tom said. We were in the pick-up truck driving through Hepburn, Iowa. On the outskirts of town was a little house. In the backyard, a satellite dish.

"That one's got a motor drive," Tom said. The truck was slowing down. There was a stack of wood propped against the south wall of the house. The plastic on the windows was ripped and flapping in the wind. The yard was mud. The dish was turned away from the house to the south. It didn't rock or sway in the wind, though the stalk it was attached to seemed puny. The dish was the color of used soap.

"They can aim the thing from inside the house." He smiled a little. "I'd say it's pulling in the Playboy channel right now." He could tell, he told me. There were really only two satellites up there. Low in the southern sky and a little lower. I asked him about scrambling the signal. He said that the cable companies keep threatening to do it.

We'd been out in the country around Villisca in Montgomery County in southwest Iowa. Tom was showing me the neighborhood. We'd been through Nodaway and Guss and Hawleyville, and now we were on the way back to his farm. It was the first thaw of the year, and the roads were sweaty and slick. And it did seem, as we wandered around, that the satellite dish was replacing the old metal, many-bladed, windmill water pump. Again it struck me how steady these dish antennae are, cocked ears, in the landscape that pitches and rolls even in the slightest breeze. The old windmills were constantly turning, creaking, the red fish tail bearing the blades into the wind. I suppose school children in the cities would still make the windmill the centerpiece of a farm portrait. Windmill, barn, silo. That's a farm. But in the country, farms are more likely to be made up of grain bins and sheds and long low confinement buildings that look something like mobile homes. And now these dishes: big plastic platters, pie pans, some made out of a metal netting with overlapping panels like a vegetable steamer, a black mesh strainer. Kitchen utensils grown big, gone feral.

I imagine that the windmills that look so natural on the farm today looked pretty silly when they were put up late last century, the newest item from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. The way we change our thinking about industrial artifacts is curious. Iowa celebrates a covered bridge festival every summer near Winterset. Wooden covered bridges, there is no doubt, have entered a realm of celebration, a time to marvel at the beauty and craft of these old things, to urge their preservation. I've noticed a change of wind in the feelings directed toward the iron and steel truss bridges that replaced the covered bridge. As concrete replaces the rusting hulks, the I-beams, the rivets, the tie bars, the scroll work in upper reaches of the iron, the rust itself, take on new meanings. Nostalgia. Awe. Delight. There will be a metal bridge festival soon.

They stood out—the old windmill towers and the new dishes, the super-structure of ships at sea, the identifying silhouette. Sometimes the dish was rigged right into the ruins of the old well. The yard lights were coming on. We headed back to Tom's house to change for dinner.

When you drive in the country you have to use the odometer. The odometer becomes something more than a rough measure of engine life considered in the used car lot. The roads on the map to Tom's house and farm were marked off in quarter miles, half miles. And landmarks. The white house, the bridge, the railroad track. The directions were like the old guidebooks before signs. Before, signs were the only thing that stayed the same.

I had rented a white car and I was taking much pleasure plowing along those roads, picturing the spray of mud along the sides. The roads were straight. I watched

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the numbers slip around. A 7 and I'd look up from the dash. There would be a turn, another straight road going up and down over the next hill.

This part of Iowa has hills. That's a big surprise to people, hills in Iowa. Every summer *The Des Moines Register* sponsors a bike ride across the state which attracts many out of state participants. The newspaper files reports daily as the bikes head east. There is only one story to report, and the newspaper reports it over and over: the out-of-state riders are amazed at how hilly Iowa is. Below Interstate 80 are the foothills, then further south, the Alps of Iowa.

Because there are hills, more farms have more animals, the land in pasture grass and alfalfa instead of row crops. I saw plenty of cattle and hogs and sheep on both sides of the road. And the fields were fenced yet, which might indicate a pretty good chance of animals still on the place and sheltering since the sky was close and wet snow would come and go.

Of course, I found the house. Tom probably had been giving those directions for years. I remember a class in junior high school called language arts that consisted, it seemed, of giving directions to get to places in the city I myself had never been.

I pulled into the driveway between the house where Tom had been born and the one where he grew up and now lived. I scrambled out of the car without my jacket. Really, I wanted to see the pattern of mud the front wheel drive had created. It was cold in the wind. Tom came out of the feed mill and over the scale, up to where I was parked. I started in about how great his directions were, how great what I'd seen of the farm so far, how great it was for him to have me visit.

He was wearing blue striped coveralls and a winter COOP hat with the flaps down. Resting on the bill was a white cloth mask he used when he worked in the confinement buildings. He looked younger because he'd shaved off his mustache. "It freezes outside in the winter and melts when I go in the buildings."

Tom had just started farming on his own, a partner with his father. He had graduated a couple of months earlier, in December, from Iowa State. Tom's brief time at home, his short time being a farmer, had nearly coincided with this year's farm crisis. There had been inklings of problems—bank closings, foreclosures, protests at farm auctions—before and through the election in November. But as he graduated, these regional news stories began to attract the attention of the nation. I visited him the weekend before the farm rally in Ames.

The events this winter and spring had that classic narrative structure as it was shaped and presented by the storytellers of newspapers, radio and television. I think it began with other stories, the "farm" movies that prefigured the rising action: white crosses in the town squares, the formation of a farm coalition, the Farm Bureau's convention in Hawaii. The climax of the Big Rally. The swift reversal: the veto. The falling action: the tattoo of President Reagan's remarks this week, a joke or wince, that he should have kept the grain and exported the farmers, that he shouldn't have said anything since it didn't get a laugh. There is a closure there. It signals enough already. There are other stories to tell. And I think we've grown used to things being told this way, the world itself adhering to the unities of some ancient aesthetics or modern attention spans.

The farm rally, the debate in Congress, the lobbying; the veto hadn't happened yet. Tom was farrowing twelve sows—twelve sows were due to farrow this weekend. I wanted to see that. And I wanted to see how the drama was affecting him. Maybe try and detect if he realized or even noticed he had been cast in this larger story, a character in somebody else's play.

I met his father, Don. He was dressed like his son. He took off the glove to shake my hand. Tom said, "This is Don." Don looked me up and down. I had worn what I consider my work clothes. I was ready to go. Don said, "Well, you better get him something to wear."

They wanted to feed the cattle before the ground got any softer that day or in case it rained or snowed and melted, which would make everything worse. The tractor would tear up the pasture as we'd go through it feeding from the hay wagon. Tom told me that his dad would be happy this summer because they'd be building terraces. "You get to build some terraces, don't you, Don?" As we headed to the pasture to feed the cattle, Tom began the task of sorting out the land for me. His neighbors', his uncle's, his folks', his own. Their own land, terraces and pastures and animals. The terraces give the look of play to the landscape, the childish glee of the sandbox. Serious business though, long-term and short-term costs. It was remarkably clear to Tom and his dad. Build terraces. Don't break open the ground.

I had to climb a ladder. I realized the only time I climb ladders is when I visit farms. Always I am amazed to find out that my body is as heavy as it is when I have to haul it up. I expect there will be something to support my back, something to lean against, because this isn't the inclined stepladder on the farm, my center of gravity tricked along the steep incline, but a straight shot up. Halfway up the side of a bin I always remember I don't climb ladders, don't really know how to. This ladder was wired to the outside of a pole shed where they kept the hay. I believe it was a ladder salvaged from a windmill, a mere wisp of a ladder.

I was in boots I'd never worn before. I had deerskin gloves that didn't move. Tom, of course, scrambled up ahead of me. The wind was blowing. The birds Tom had startled from the loft above blew away, their wings of no use.

Now we all put ourselves in these positions. I was here, a volunteer, jaunty, a good student, wishing to perform, to please. But I was already, at the foot of the ladder, in way over my head. I'm only a generation away from all of this, as are many of you out there. I know lots of things, but not too many of them have to do with physical laws. It is like learning to crawl but without the instincts or genetic triggers a baby's got. Climbing a ladder. And I understood that to climb a ladder is why I visit farms in the first place. It's the old nagging doubt of the office worker. It's *doing* things. I'm not a participatory journalist. I don't want to farm and tell. *The Paper Farmer.* My curiosity

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brought me to the base of this flimsy ladder wobbling up the side of a swaying shed. When I moved to Iowa six years ago I would have drawn a farm with a silo, a barn, and a spinning windmill in the sun. I'm just getting to know my way around, getting to feel at home. As I made ready to climb that ladder on the farm near Villisca, Iowa, there were in other parts of the country many people talking about what was happening on The Farm. I reminded myself, as a kind pep talk, that those people didn't know the first thing about what was going on. As I swung onto the ladder I also understood that important things would be decided anyway without that knowledge.

We went to the new place to feed some more cattle. The farms I visit are made up of new places and home places. If you ask a man who farms 400 acres what size is the right size for a family farm, he'll say 400 acres. Ask a man who farms 1200 acres and he is likely to say the same. Couldn't make it below 1200. The problems of this spring have a lot to do with scale—farming too much or not enough, growing or shrinking or disappearing. Don told me that this new place might have been a mistake. What he says is all understated. I'll never know the details. They bought when the land was much more expensive than it is now, now that it is falling rapidly. Don adds quickly that he isn't worried, that one good thing about Tom being a part owner is that they won't have to pay him.

Before they got the land, the hills had been cropped out in corn and soybeans. They put it into pasture. Terraces soon. We walked square bales from a barn to a stand of trees and there kicked the hay loose, another operation that I handled clumsily. The steers snuck up on us as we went back and forth, the ground sucking at our feet. Don talked a little about family history, more because he thought I wanted to hear it, I think, thought I expected it of a farmer. I remember his family history being a series of accidents, guesses, and compromises, like all histories. And I remember thinking that he was trying to disguise the haphazard past that brought us here, make it sound like there was a plan. Someone had sat down and thought all of this out. I kept kicking at the bales, pulling the twine. The cattle were patient with me. In the barn, Don pointed out the joints in the beams. Pegs instead of nails. It is his barn and he is proud of it, but nobody any of us knew built it.

Don and Cherryl live in a new house they designed. I liked it. It has one big room—kitchen, dining room, living room. A fireplace and woodstove are across the room from a big window that looks out back over the hills and terraces. You can see three valleys on a clear day, Cherryl tells me. I could see, off in the middle distance, the pole shed, the one with the ladder. I stayed the night here in a daughter's bedroom. She's away in college. Tom has his own house now.

The front yard is fenced, and if times were better, Cherryl says, they'd run sheep there. On the wall next to the big window hangs the same scene done on a loom in wool, dyed the way it must look in fall. The house was designed so there was a room for Cherryl's looms and yarns.

During lunch Cherryl asked Tom if I knew what I was getting into. Tom let me answer, ate, listened to the basketball game. Don told us what we had done, looked outside and was happy we'd beat the snow. I looked up. It was snowing. "Guessed right." Tom joked about how Don kept his knife dull. They figured out where everyone was going to be in the afternoon, including me. They asked me, and I told them what brought me here. We adjourned.

In the basement there was another room with an outside entrance where we changed again back into work clothes. When we came in earlier we took turns using the bootjack. My shoes had come off in the boots. Tom teased his dad again about a knife he had loaned me to cut twine on the bales, how dull it was. I gave Don back his knife. It was still in the coverall pocket. But we weren't going to work exactly. And when we came in before lunch we hadn't really left work the way we left our clothes in the special changing room. It feels funny, not being used to it, not going to work, not going home. I'm a tourist here.

Driving from the new house to Tom's house and the hog houses, we almost clipped a mailbox planted close to a road on a curve. I sat between Tom and Don, who was driving. They talked about the history of the mailbox. How many times it's been knocked over, the motives the neighbor might have for putting it back up in the same place after each time. How they always forget it is there.

We all waved at a car going by in the other direction. Don—two fingers off the wheel. Tom—flick of the hand from the dash. Me—more of a nod of the head, trying to pass. It is in the timing actually. Make a move too soon and the other folks can't see your subtleness. Too late, and they've gone talking about you. The people in the other car waved back.

At Tom's house we stopped on the road. Tom got out to get the mail. It's a clump of four mailboxes all with the family name. An important moment. Towns are towns because of post offices. Mail can be a daily confirmation that you are where you're supposed to be. Tom stood sorting the envelopes. Suddenly, a horn went off in the buildings. It sounded like a submarine about to submerge, general quarters. Tom sprang into the cab. Don gunned into the drive, shouting instructions to Tom. "I'll let you off at the barn!" My God, I thought, something's happened in one of the hog houses—a fire, they can't breathe, pigs are being born. We bounced over the yard. Tom had the door open, leapt and ran to the barn. "Dive! Dive!" the buzzer said.

It was the phone. Cherryl had called to say that Iowa had lost again.

Tom got me a mask from the little shed that houses the scale. They keep the masks there for when buyers come on the farm. The mask I got was like the ones Tom and his father had perched on the bills of their COOP caps. Mine was whiter. It felt like felt. It had subtle indentations pressed into it, a ribbing, that made it cup my nose and mouth. There was a metal strip at the top. I crimped it around my nose. I fiddled the mask into place. Every time I went into the hog houses for the rest of the visit, I

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had to get a new mask out of the shed. They were in a box, nestled inside one another. I never learned the trick of storing one out of the way, like a visor, on my cap, whipping it down and in place when it was needed. My masks looked like used tissue after a few minutes, crumpled, stove in. The metal clip whitened where I tried to bend it back in shape, snapped in two. I'd wrestle the thing off my head, wedge the rubber band from my ears, stuff it in my pocket.

After all that, the mask didn't do any good. I had brought some allergy pills, antihistamines. I knew what I was getting into.

The houses are closed up tight in the winter. I was surprised by the flies. You forget flies over the winter, get to know them again slowly in the spring. They don't go away in the confinement hog house where it is always like it is—warm, close, moist. The manure from the animals goes through slats in the floor, into holding tanks right below us. In late winter the pits were nearly full, four foot deep. It wasn't that it smelled bad. It just smelled. Sensitive sense. I wasn't used to using it. But the mask has nothing to do with smell. It's beyond smell. I was breathing, breathing in the pit gases, and my lungs were closing up shop.

Tom was showing me a table full of medicines, drugs. He had told me before how the use of the stuff concerned him, especially subtherapeutically, not for curing a disease in the animal but to stimulate its growth. We were in a house that had thirty crates, a sow and a litter of a dozen more or less in each. I was trying to breathe and listen and see. A sow would stand up in her cage. Her pigs crashed around the pen getting out of the way. The tubular cage keeps the sow from rolling on the pigs when she lies down. It leaves room for the pigs to maneuver. I could hear water running, the snuffling at the automatic fountains, the squealing, the jostling. The pigs nearest me were curious, sniffing. It seemed Tom might be talking to himself, thinking out loud about the drugs. These were his animals, his building, his drugs. But he had bought into this system. He'd have done things differently, tried to think things through. But he could get no distance, elbow room. There were the pressures, forces that were beyond his control—bankers and markets and this system. These systems were new, still evolving. They had no track record. These things—the buildings, the economy, the method of production—had lives of their own. And in the building this other life, the pigs, still after all the study, finally, unknown and unknowable. They were looking up at us. Tom stabbed at a big syringe. The mask made it even more difficult for me to breathe. I felt that panic—suffocation, drowning, choking. It was in the air. Tom was in it every day. "You get used to it," he said. "But you do hear about what they're calling farmer's lung. Just like the miners get." My own drugs weren't doing a thing.

In the farrowing house Tom was rearranging the crates, preparing the ones where the sow was about to give birth. He slid mesh flooring in over the slats so the newborn pigs wouldn't slip through. He gathered heat lamps, hung them on either side of the laboring sow.

The sows were due anytime. Tom had written to me saying, "Come on out." Attached to the letter was a list of dates and numbers of sows. The letter was done on his computer, a dot matrix printer. Tom had majored in computers and math at Iowa State. Farm operations and agriculture classes hadn't interested him. He liked telling me about a farm operation class he took where the instructor insisted a certain mower-conditioner be pulled by a 65-horsepower tractor.

"I had cut thousands of acres with that very implement back home," he said, "and we never used more than 35 horsepower. I told the guy that. He didn't believe me. I went back home one weekend and looked it up in the manual. It suggested 25."

In the arguments during those weeks of the farm crisis, the position that farming was a business like any other business came up often. It seems that the decision to return to farming or to leave it and work somewhere else does not come easily to farm kids. It is not like the usual vocational choice, this job or that one. It might be true that farming is like other businesses. But it *is* true that there are few businesses anymore that involve children the way farming still does. A land of opportunity implies a model of the world that is out there off your folks' land. Farm kids are different from city and suburban kids because they have this decision to make: stay or go. To the rest, to go is a given.

Tom came back to the farm. That means he will work with and be near his mother and father every day for a very long time. It is a state of affairs that is, by definition, insulated and it is, by its rarity, a state further removed from the rest of America.

Tom's a quiet man. He does things. He may not talk about what motivated him because he believes I could not begin to understand the reasons that brought him home to Villisca, or because he doesn't believe in words themselves, their processing, that matrix of dots.

One sow had been laboring too long, Tom thought. He slid on a clear plastic glove that covered his whole arm. He squirted on a disinfectant and reached up inside the sow. He said, "Everything seems all right. I don't get it." The sow was grunting and panting. Tom pulled his arm back out. He clutched a pig. It was alive. We watched for a bit, seeing if any more would follow. The newborn stumbled around on the mesh flooring. Tom put him under the heat lamp. We went on about other chores. Every time we came back into the farrowing house, Tom checked the sow. He didn't want to induce contractions, the drugs again, but decided finally to go ahead. Tom has told me about the vet who wanted to abort bred gilts so that they would cycle at the same time, give birth all at once, take the guesswork out of it.

I was able to breathe easier in the farrowing house. I don't know why. Tom went back to the nursery. I watched the sow and the one pig.

I wandered around the yard. It was snowing again, big heavy globs of snow. It wasn't sticking. My mask hung around my neck. It had somehow gotten turned inside out. I met Don coming out of the feed mill. He had been

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grinding feed. "The smartest thing my dad did," he said about the mill. He showed me the boars in their pens. He called a huge spotted one a wimp, said he was much happier with the Durocs. The sow I'd been watching was one of the group that had been artificially inseminated. He showed me an old hog house that he thought might start up again after a little work. I saw the honey wagon, the manure tank. Don wished the ground would freeze so he could pump the pits and spread it on the fields. He would have to do something with it. He didn't want to think about pumping it over the hill.

I asked him if he was coming up to the rally in Ames. He said he didn't think he had the time. He went on. His feelings about the whole thing were mixed. He thought some might have deserved it, borrowed too much. But there was bad luck, the breaks. He told about a neighbor who might be helping his neighbors *too* much, dropping things on his own place to go help. Tom and he had tried to translate what they did on the farm into the terms of a regular job, so many hours a week. They were working enough. Who wasn't? You compete with your neighbors as well as the folks in Canada.

I thought then of the telling phrase from the Vietnam War, of destroying the village to save it. What were those farmers going to fight for up in Ames? It seemed that what was being said about farms wasn't meshing. Was the farm the innovative frontier of agricultural science and enterprise? Or was it the repository of traditional beliefs and values? It also seemed that no one could approach farming without nostalgia both for the past and the future. It was this tug of war between longings. But what seemed to be longed for most was that the problems should be settled, fixed, taken care of, finished. No more manure in the pits or flies or problems in the farrowing pens, no more arguing in the commodity pits or congresses. Wanting it to be over and done with—that was the one clear message of the farm rally. By calling it a crisis, by treating these problems as if they were like a bad midwestern snow storm, we were able to ignore the fundamental issues as well as the daily realities that finally have no answers or solutions, like life or death. Some things simply must be done, not finished.

Outside the nursery door was a dead pig. Its mother had crushed it. It was smashed on one side, waffled flat by the slats on the floor. It should have been big enough, smart enough, fast enough to get out of the way. There is a steady loss of pigs. It is hard to tell if the crates and pens constructed with this type of thing in mind might also contribute to it. In the alleys and gutters of both houses were dead pigs. Some were born dead. Some were runts that couldn't compete with the rest of the litter. There were not that many. But it didn't take many to notice.

Cherryl has told me how much Tom hates to kill the ones that have been crushed but aren't dead yet. Don has been taking care of that for a long time. Tom does it, but he can't get used to it.

I think about the Midwest sometimes as being the great graveyard for the country. People leave the Midwest to go live somewhere else. But bodies are always being shipped back to be buried here. I wonder if the rest of the country doesn't think of the Midwest as they would think of their local cemetery. Both are even landscaped the same—not too hilly, few sturdy trees, plastic flowers. People who don't live here are kind of proud that they can't be bothered with sorting out the I states—Iowa, Illinois, Indiana. They lose track of the family plots in the same way. Out of sight, out of mind. Only two seasons here. Winter and summer. Even to call the Midwest the heart of the country is not to get it right. It is more the gut. It is the gut of the nation. So why should we expect anyone to come visit? They fly over. They pass through (even better). The Midwest busies itself with changing the living into the dead, the dead into the living.

It's just messy here. Confinement houses, slaughter houses. Our houses. If the whole country were zoned by one big planning board, we all know what would be allowed to go on here. It goes on here anyway. Dirt. Dirt is us.

I was outside the nursery door trying to catch my breath. It was raining now. I was balancing on a board that bridged a pool of muddy water. They had to regrade this part of the yard. The crushed pig was by the door.

Inside Tom was putting a litter of pigs into an old wood milk crate suspended from a scale. I had tried to gather up the pigs as they scampered around the pen, but I got winded instantly. I went back into the house. Tom was working smoothly, quickly. He was taking the gilts out of the milk crate, putting them back with their mother. I was trying to help Tom as he castrated the boars. I held their hind legs up, the pig head rested against my belly. Tom felt between their legs, pushed up, made two quick cuts with a scalpel. He squeezed out the testicles and cut the connecting cords. He swabbed on some disinfectant. I took the barrow back to the litter. Tom reached for the next pig.

I could do one litter at a time before I had to get outside in the cold air. Outside the nursery door was the dead pig. Water ran in sheets off the metal roof of the building. The board floated on the pool of mud until I stepped on it. The mill was grinding and mixing feed. I could hear the clanking of the lids on the feed bunks down in the finishing barns. Now it was snowing.

Tom lives in the house he grew up in. The house where he was born is across the driveway. When he moved back home, he moved into that house. But it was too cold, too old, too big. He moved over to the newer house.

We changed out of our work clothes in the basement. The basement was filled with work clothes, boots, gloves, hats. Tom had told me he never had to buy a coat since all the companies give coats to him.

It is a big old farm house, the type of house a city kid might draw when drawing a farm house. But there is nothing in it except a couch and TV in the living room, a bed in the bedroom, a computer in the dining room. He has two cats. They were waiting for us at the head of the stairs.

He showed me his records, entered the litter weights he'd just recorded. Don hadn't kept detailed records. School paid off here. We were waiting to go up to his

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THE VIEW FROM IOWA

Agreement is general nowadays that the farm "problem" has long since become the farm "crisis." Five years of high interest rates have added billions of dollars to agricultural costs in this country (a one percent rise in the interest rate adds roughly two billion dollars to farm costs); the overvalued U.S. dollar inflates farm export prices by 30 percent, and commodity prices on the domestic market continue at discouragingly low levels. Some sources are estimating that in the not-too-distant future as many as 25% of American farmers will be forced off the land.

Iowa finds itself at the forefront of the crisis. Since 1981, land values in the state have fallen by 37%—with no end to the slide in sight—and the office of Iowa's Governor Terry Branstad estimates that one-third of the state's farmers are in financial difficulty as this new growing season begins. Bank failures in Iowa so far this year: seven. What farm state residents see that others may miss is the impact of such economic bad news on, for example, the factories that build farm machinery, on the ordinary shops and stores and businesses where farm families trade, and on the overall psychology of citizens both rural and urban.

In the past few years the work force at the Waterloo Tractor Works of the John Deere company—headquartered in Moline, Illinois—has fallen by half. Tractor inventories remain high, and the prospect of call-backs for laid-off blue-collar workers is slim. White-collar workers who are invited to "retire early" from the company receive a $5000 bonus and the company's promise not to contest unemployment claims. In Charles City, the White Farm Equipment Co. was already in process of declaring Chapter 11 bankruptcy when its principal creditor, Borg-Warner Acceptance Corporation, called due some $214 million in notes.

Such bad news over so long a period of time has created a kind of hectic suggestibility in Iowans.

Item: In its search for methods of raising money, the legislature in Des Moines last year okayed parimutuel betting and this year voted a state lottery—the lottery income apparently to help construct a "world trade center," showcasing Iowa products to prospective overseas buyers; coincidentally, the legislature was unable fully to fund the budgets of the state's Regents universities.

Item: A west coast group calling itself the Evangelical Oregon Trust has managed to persuade a number of frantic Iowa farmers to give up their land in exchange for worthless certificates.

Finally, John Deere, whose huge engine-building capacity sits nearly idle, made its own corporate desperation public and typical. "We're looking to get into the government's pocket for engines," a Deere spokesman told a television reporter, "and we'll do anything to get there."

—R.W.

parents' house for dinner. We talked about basketball a little. Bobby Knight had just thrown a chair at a referee. Tom told me he wanted to get one of those satellite dishes so he could watch basketball. At college he played pickup games with the team, ran around with the players. Cherryl describes her son with the help of basketball.

"Tom," she said, "is always one on one."

We played a game on the computer that had to do with outer space. Tom said it was the only game he had. The program recorded all of his scores from all the games he'd played. He purposely lost so we could watch the starship explode.

I looked at the catalogue from the semen company.

Tom waved his tax form at me. "Won't have to pay anything this year."

We sat on the couch. The cats roamed over us.

Later, I drove us to the new house in my muddy rented car. After dinner, after his parents had talked with me, Tom's father drove him home. Together they checked the sows, walked the yard.

Tom got the day off Sunday. He gets only every other Sunday off. He'll sometimes save up the days and take the whole weekend off. He wants to go to the Big Eight basketball finals in Kansas City. Tom had said that he didn't want to work for the big computer companies, didn't want to work for anybody. Of course, he is working for himself, and he does boss himself around. Still, in complex ways, he is an employee of the large companies that sell him equipment, chemicals, seeds, and the sperm that he depends upon, that give him bright jackets and caps, his uniform. He is aware of this. There is irony on the farm. It mixes with those sincere, rarely stated beliefs in hard work, family and independence. But finally it isn't true independence at all. The debate that is going on in agriculture, beyond the immediate problems of debt restructuring, seems to be about what ways farmers will lose their independence. Will they become parts of corporate structures or of the ones that emanate from nature? Does happiness derive from subordination to instead of domination over the world? Which family are they to be part of? Which kind of work?

Since Tom had the day off, Cherryl and I were in the farrowing house doing teeth and tails and inoculations. Don had come home the night before saying that the sow Tom was worried about had had her litter. The twelve pigs were nosing into the teats, constantly arranging their order, swarming. A sow in another crate was standing up, scraping the floor. She was lactating, the colostrum in pools beneath her. She would be next.

Cherryl was dressed in brown coveralls, the boots and hat. She didn't like to use the masks. She was standing in the alley between the crates trying to read the labels on the bottles. We were going to give the six hour old pigs injections to prevent scouring, a virulent form of diarrhea. There might have been an iron shot too. We took the bottles and the needles and syringes over to the crate. I put a board across the top of the pen and we set up store. Cherryl reached in, grabbed a pig and cradled it behind the front legs. She gave a shot into the right shoulder, put down the syringe, picked up the other one, and shot the

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left shoulder. She put down the syringe and picked up a livestock marker, a big crayon, and striped the pig's back. The stripe was bright pink, flamingo pink. The pink turned a kind of tangerine color under the heat lamp when she set him down. Him. That had to be done too today. Cherryl had to notch the ear to identify the pig as male or female. The day before when we were castrating, Tom could read the ears on the pigs as we pulled them out. We found one notched wrong. "Cherryl must've done this group," he said. He asked me to remind him to tease her. He forgot. I forgot to remind him. As Cherryl readied for another pig I told her about the day before. She laughed.

I had just been watching her work, juggle all those operations. She asked me if I wanted to inject while she grabbed and marked.

I thought the pig was more nervous about being held than being shot. It settled down, stopped squirming in my hand after a moment. It thrummed, a little engine. No, that's not fair. It was not like a machine. But there was this tension and power. The belly was tight, harmonies under the skin. The cord was turning brown and trailed down along my arm.

When we were talking about sheep, and later, when he urged me to come back out for the calving, Tom had said that all baby animals are cute. Even this pig was cute. I gave him his shots. I was too gentle with the needle at first. I felt like I was trying to open a new jar of olives while I was in new clothes. Such fine tuning of strength. I tried to keep my eye steady on the correct dosage mark as the plunger went down. One big mark for one. Two half marks for the other. We finished the litter that way. It had gotten easier. The pigs were back in business, the pink stripes punching in and out. By that time I was having trouble breathing again. With my last breath I was making excuses to Cherryl, apologizing.

I waited outside the building. Snow now. Cherryl brought out a pig so I could see how the teeth and tails were clipped, the ear notched. These pigs will be in pens, and crowded in with other pigs. They'll nip at each other, bite tails and ears. Cutting out the teeth, docking the tails is one response. The other, of course, is to change the whole system. Yesterday, as we worked, Tom talked about animal rights and people who do not farm who are concerned with the rights of animals. It was another delicate balance. He explained to me, perhaps a bit defensively, why he was doing this or that. No anesthesia for castrating.

Wouldn't do it at all if boars brought a price. It's another drug. Lose fewer pigs to weather, more to accidents. Fewer people have to raise the food.

I wondered if he thought about these moral ambiguities, these practical considerations while he worked, as he most often does, alone without the benefit of my naiveté. I imagine he does since the consequences of his actions are oftentimes right at hand. That is not to say that what he does or feels he has to do to animals is right or wrong, just that he is conscious. He considers. As I tried to breathe outside the farrowing house, I also understood that the way we all eat contributes to the way Tom works and the way Tom lives. Tom is as humane with his animals as he can be. Can we be more humane with Tom? Saying he has a will, a choice is not enough, I think, at least not enough until we look to our own choices, our own will.

Cherryl pried open the pig's mouth and showed me the needle teeth. She worked the cutters in and snipped off the ends. She held the pig between her legs. It seems there is a point with any animal where it will stop struggling, trying to get free. It is a kind of freeze. Just a moment. Then more wiggling, twisting. In that moment, between breaths, Cherryl snipped the teeth, the tails. "Most times," she said, "there's little blood." The ears are encoded with a series of v'ed nips. Sex, litter, number in the litter. She'll work around the big ears. Clock positions. The edge of the cut flushed red, a pencil line. There had been so little color that weekend.

Cherryl went back in the house to finish the pigs. I stood out in the yard, cold and tired and sick. I would leave for home after lunch. I was alone and unable, really, to make sense yet of the weekend. Up in an oak tree, an old tree house, wet and rotting. I couldn't see any ladder or rope, no way up.

Tom came out of his house in his work clothes. He had his hands in his pockets. I didn't think he was going to work—it was his day off—but he might have thought he was going to watch other people work. Sometimes that is the best entertainment.

That's when we went for a ride through the country. We saw things that did not look too good, dirt pooled in the ditches, equipment out in the open rusting, a new Butler building abandoned in the field. In the middle of another field was a used car lot that Tom had never seen before. Everything looked worse because of the weather, the time of the year. The main streets of the towns were in ruins, not old enough yet to be transformed into places to come see, not ghost towns because there were people here. We could tell by the new dish in the side yard. There were people here watching TV.

In the yard outside the coliseum at Ames the day of the rally, semi-trailers circled a stand of satellite dishes. All the networks were there sending these pictures out into space. It might have been a basketball game, a graduation. Looking at the bright trucks, the gleaming dishes, I guess I felt connected to something. I thought of the dish Tom wanted, wanting to pull the whole world back down to earth.

Why should his life be more pure than my own, why should he conform to my notion of the farm generated by butter and bread commercials I've seen on TV, or to my image of what is rural or even poor? Our ghost towns are on the air, our ghosts. Pictures without context. I think you should visit some of the hidden places of the country, farms and factories. Schools and offices. Get authorization to be admitted, become the author of what you witness.

Tom writes to me. They are out in the field collecting new calves. He tells me of the largest calf. His mother, for some unknown reason, has rejected him. They have to put her in a squeeze pen so she'll sit still and nurse. He writes to say that calving will go on for several more weeks, that he has twelve new litters of pigs. He writes to say he is a tired young farmer. He writes to say I should come out. □

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Jenny Stone Humphries

THE MAKE-BELIEVE BALLROOM

I have been a checker right here at the Tri-Me Supermarket for twenty-two years and only in the past couple of years have I realized it is having its effect. It's either me or the kind of people we have coming in now. I don't know which.

I never have a chance to pass the time of day with my customers like I used to and that is the one thing that makes my work so pleasant. It is not easy to be a good checker. You have to be fast because even if they don't have a place in God's world to go, people don't like to wait in line. You have to call out the prices as you go so the customers know you're giving them the benefit of the specials, and then there's the cents-off coupons to keep up with. Of course, the big thing we have to contend with is shoplifting. It's not just a problem in your larger cities, it's spread out to even here. Not just kids either. You'd be amazed.

I'm on my feet from nine to six, trying to keep ahead of what's rolling down the belt. There's no time to be pleasant hardly and I never have a chance to relax and take in the whole picture. When you're looking to see what they're doing with their hands, checking their pockets, and keeping an eye on their umbrellas, you don't get to see the whole person. All you see are the pieces of people. Your eyes wander around like they are disconnected while your mind stays with the cash register. I have trained my mind to stay right with that register even with all the distractions we have going on around here.

Mr. Lummus, my boss, keeps that little mini-television set going in his office all the time. In the morning it's those talk shows, then those foolish eternal game shows. Now I do like to watch some of the soap operas because they are so true to life. I love the weddings and the way they totally ignore the marriage vows they are supposed to repeat and say what they please. It's never til death us do part because we all know that is not possible if they are to keep the ratings up. I do manage to keep abreast while I'm at the store.

Anyway Mrs. Potter came in the other day and tried to walk out with a rib eye roast in her son's gym bag. I saw her do it in the mirror. We have these mirrors all over the store; they make the place look like the Make-Believe Ballroom. I used to listen to that program on the radio when I was married; it came from New Orleans from high atop one of the big hotels there. The M.C. would play the best music in the world and I imagined myself dancing around this ballroom with all these spangled lights and mirrors hung from the ceiling. The Make-Believe Ballroom was in your mind of course, which was as good a place as any to have it since I cannot dance.

Anyway we have these mirrors all over the store and folks don't think we can really see what's going on, but I'm here to tell you, we can. If it were not for those mirrors, our rib eye would be twenty-four dollars a pound.

You know who pays for all this shoplifting—me and you, the honest folks in this world who work and make do. That's who's paying for all this. You'd think the shoplifters would know it's coming out of their pocket too, but they just don't care and that's the state of the world today. Nobody cares to teach anyone anything anymore. And you sure won't learn unless you are taught. A keen little willow switch helps too.

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I saw Mrs. Potter in the mirror over the meat counter. We have two mirrors there because that's where the money is. I said not a word to see if the woman would change her mind and declare what she had taken. Cool as ice she was, asking about the weekend specials and if she really had to buy ten dollars worth to get the five pounds of sugar for ninety-nine cents. Some will try to take advantage. What I do is push the sugar to one side, then add everything else up to make sure they have ten dollars worth. I can usually tell because I've been doing this long enough to know ten dollars on a register tape. It's like my fingers give a little tingle when we reach the magic number, as they say on TV.

When I finished adding up Mrs. Potter's order I passed a few pleasantries then I said, "Look what's happened. I believe a rib eye roast has got stuck down in your boy's gym bag. It happens all the time," I said, hauling the roast from out of the boy's nasty towels in the bag. "You get busy checking off your list and don't look where you put things."

Mrs. Potter gave me this sickly little smile and said, "Well I'm glad you caught it. Saves me a trip back."

She wouldn't have come back if the road was greased all the way. I do wonder how they think they can get away with it. And they keep coming back—wouldn't dream of taking their business elsewhere because anywhere else charges would be brought. Besides there's no place within ten miles that can beat the prices we have right here at the Tri-Me.

I shopped at the big Food Mart last week just to check prices. I do that. Everything was as high as a cat's back, and the produce looked like the culls we set out for the chicken farm outside of town here. I wouldn't have had the lettuce if you gave it to me.

We have a lot of rinky-dink with bottle returns too. The kids bring the bottles in, then just help themselves again from the return box at the front of the store. We had to put a Yale lock on the box and only me and Mr. Lummus has a key. Things got that bad.

Now understand when I'm talking about all this double dealing, I'm not talking about folks like Farley Craddock. All he's got in this world is his Social Security and half a stomach. He carries those clackety teeth of his around in his back pocket. He lives on corn flakes and canned fruit. Comes in once a week on Saturday and gets his week's supply of cereal. I try to tempt his appetite. "Farley," I'll say, "we have ground chuck on special and it's just as nice and lean as it can be."

The man is in obvious need of protein, which as we all know is one of the body's major building blocks. Farley's skin just hangs on him slack as pajamas.

Now Farley will occasionally slip a can of peaches or Kadota figs in with his order. He first sets it aside like he's decided against it, then when you look again, it's gone like a rabbit in a hat. When Farley gets a check he comes back in and tells me he got out with a can of something or other that wasn't on his register tape. He pays for it right then and there. I don't look upon that as shoplifting. It's more like extending him a line of credit and I don't mind doing that. Farley's good for it.

Mr. Lummus told me the other day, "I'm thinking of retiring if this keeps up. It's getting the best of me."

I was just stricken. Mr. Lummus has been through the years the best thing in the world to me. It was during that mini-depression we had during the Eisenhower administration that my husband saw fit to leave his obligations, including me as pregnant as I could be.

"Well," my husband Woodrow said to me one morning, "I think I'll just take these red-letter Bibles and see what I can do with them in the eastern part of the state."

He must have done something with them because his shadow never crossed my door again. Woodrow was a wonderful bowler, but as I learned to my dismay there's a lot more to marriage than being a good bowler. I pray that one day God will sit Woodrow down and make him be still long enough to read what it says in those Bibles he took with him.

When it became plain that my husband had no intention of returning, I went to Mr. Lummus. "It looks like my husband has been detained indefinitely," I said. "Could you use another checker here at the Tri-Me? I know you've got Mrs. Lummus to help out, but I imagine she would like to get away from the store every now and then."

"I've been thinking about that very thing," Mr. Lummus said. "My wife's been having these headaches."

"Well if you'll hold the job until I can have this baby, I'll do you a good day's work."

"I'll tell you what," he said, "I won't *hold* the job, but if it's still *here* after the baby comes, it's yours."

Couldn't be fairer and, of course, the job was waiting. There's no retirement plan, but then Mr. Lummus doesn't have a retirement plan either. When he sells out, he'll just take what money he gets and buy one of those camper vans with the sunset painted in glo-lite colors on the back window and head off to Florida like everybody does who has a little something put aside. He says that's what he is going to do.

Mr. Lummus has been feeling a lot of pressure since the construction started on our new post office. We have a lot of the lower element coming into the store now. They barge in here wearing cut-offs and handkerchiefs hanging down off the backs of their caps like Arabs. They don't buy enough to make it worth the trouble—a six pack, a package of cold meat, small stuff. But what they can steal! It takes Mr. Lummus up in his office above the floor and me down here and *all* the mirrors to keep them from walking away with the store when they gang in here.

My own son Wayne has one of those construction jobs for the summer. It's just temporary, but the pay is good. Wayne has had two years of college and I'm fairly confident he will see his way clear to continue on and get his degree. You're nothing without an education. That's what I tell him. "Get out and get yourself an education and make a place for yourself."

Wayne doesn't like to hear that, but I keep saying it. I do not come from educated people, but if each generation gives a leg up to the next one coming along, one day we will be educated people.

It is a strange thing to me how we do not look for redemption and justification at the Cross as we are sup-

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posed to do; we look for that from our very own children. When Wayne goes out and makes good, all my hours here at the store will be redeemed just like those cents-off coupons, and I will be justified in a very real way. I look forward to that.

It was about six o'clock one afternoon when Wayne came in from work to get his cold six pack. I had just checked out Farley one day early because he was going to his sister's on Saturday. I stood there trying not to look while Farley did his little disappearing act with a can of fruit cocktail.

Mr. Lummus said, "When you finish up, why don't you go on home with Wayne? You can catch the seven o'clock news."

I was in no hurry to catch the seven o'clock news—that Live Eye doesn't miss a thing. They shoot the kneecaps off of everything that walks, and while I'm sorry about it, I would rather not see it on my television set. I certainly have no power over foreign terrorists and I don't know who does. They seem to be a law unto themselves. Let them show what their people are doing over there and we'll show what ours are doing over here. Besides I do believe they can think of more maliciousness than we can. They seem to have a natural bent for it. I miss John Cameron Swayze because he always stayed so calm and seemed to have everything in hand. He was my all time favorite.

Wayne told me the other night after a special on the arms race that he believes we are doomed. "It's just a matter of time before we get nuked," he said.

That may very well be true because we have lost all count of the bombs and even who's got them. But it is not for Man to know the hour of the End. As for me, I intend to carry on just exactly like I have been.

"We may be nuked and we may not be," I said to Wayne. "You could also step off the curb tomorrow and be run down by the five o'clock bus on the way to Raleigh. If you just stand around waiting for something to happen, you'll wake up one day and find you're a has been. That's as bad as being nuked." It really is.

I blame Viet Nam for a lot of this. They go on and on about it. Wayne still gets upset over Viet Nam. I wish he wouldn't take it so personally since he was not involved, but all these young people do.

I tell Wayne to look at Harold Reeves who had his legs literally riddled by a machine gun in the Korean War. That was not an especially good war either. To this day, there are little blue pock marks all over Harold's legs, and he hurts all the time because they didn't get all the lead out. He never says a word. Not a word. He is not surly about it, but carries on as we all have to do.

Anyway as I said, I was in no hurry to catch the seven o'clock news, but since my feet were swelling right out of my shoes, it seemed a good time to call it a day.

It wasn't until Wayne turned to leave with his beer and potato chips that I saw that glint of cellophane inside his afternoon newspaper. To this day, I don't know why I looked for it. Actually I didn't look for it. The thing is you just look things over automatically. I watched Wayne walk away, and everything just drained away in a cold swirl. I should have said something because my son is no different than anyone else. They don't make special rules for him. For him to steal from my place of employment was the worst. If Wayne wanted to mess around with doom, he was certainly going about it in the right way. They do not hand out business degrees at the county farm.

When I got back to the house, Wayne was sitting at the kitchen table in these white tennis shorts he wears. To my knowledge he does not play tennis but likes to dress the part. He was plugged into the earphones on his tape player. I do hate those things because it's not like a radio or television that we can all follow; it's a private insane thing. Wayne was just lost in another entire world.

I took the picnic ham for the weekend out of my grocery bag and set it on the table. A picnic ham has all the protein in the world anybody needs.

"Don't fix supper for me," Wayne said, "I told Sylvia I'd come over and we'd cook out." His smile was as nice as his manners. Wayne's been going with this Sylvia for about three months, and she has him sitting up and doing tricks. When she gets that little catch in her voice, Wayne turns himself wrong side out.

I opened the refrigerator to put the ham in, and there they lay bold as sin itself. Two strip steaks cut extra thick, twelve dollars worth of our steaks.

"Where did you get the steaks?" I said.

Wayne did not hear me, or chose not to. I walked over and pushed that red intercept button on his tape player so he could hear me plain. "Where did you get the steaks?"

"Picked them up after work," he said, taking off his earphones.

Picked them up was just exactly what he had done.

"I saw you take them," I said, and sat down in the chair opposite him. For a moment I couldn't think of one other thing to say.

Wayne didn't even sit up straight in his chair. "Now don't you get upset," he said, "two steaks is the least of what's taken out of that place. They won't ever be missed."

"Was it your intention to make it so I can't hold my head up in this town? What if Mr. Lummus had seen you take them?"

"Mr. Lummus don't see nothing," Wayne said.

"Well there are all kinds of ways of seeing," I said. "Mr. Lummus can see all right. He can see when somebody needs a job, he can see when somebody needs a little credit, and he can see when somebody tries to take advantage. He sees what he needs to see and don't you forget it ever in this life."

Wayne slammed out of the house and I could hear the tires on his car throwing gravel in the driveway. I turned on the radio and sat there at the kitchen table collecting my thoughts.

Maybe I expected too much from Wayne. It looked like I'd put my money on a dark horse and let me tell you, children are exactly that. I didn't know if it was a case of doing too much or doing too little; you never know, and there doesn't seem to be any good way to raise them.

When Wayne went off to college, I got him a beautiful matched set of luggage. Mr. Lummus said it was too

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much to give him. "It's just too much," he said, "all in the world the boy needs is a dopp kit or one of those clock radios with a snooze alarm."

But I had my heart set on the matched set of luggage. Mr. Lummus chipped in on the gold initials we had put on—it sort of personalized it and also lessened the chance of somebody taking it off him.

Wayne said, "Momma, what do you think I'm going to do with all this luggage?"

"That's what I want you to be thinking about," I said, "and it will be right there in the hall closet when you need it."

It was my thought that when he got his degree in business, he certainly couldn't go off carrying his worldly possessions in one of those little knapsacks.

Maybe I should have spent more time with Wayne but still he was not one of these latch key children. No he was not. Every day after school, he would come by the store and wait while I finished up with the three o'clock mill crowd and could take my break. "I'll be back," I would tell Mr. Lummus. Then I would walk Wayne home, spread him up a sandwich, and get him settled down. They let me do that at the store and that was the major reason I worked at the supermarket instead of the mill. I could be a little more flexible.

I told Wayne not to sit in front of the television set too much, but you can't be there every minute of the day. Always when I would get home, the room had a feeling of sudden quiet like it is after a flash of lightning. This stuff they show on TV in the daytime makes the kids think that everybody is going to clap hysterically and give them a double door refrigerator if they come up with the right answer. It is very rare when that happens in ordinary life.

Sitting there at the kitchen table after Wayne left, I guess you could say I went on one of these guilt trips they are always talking about, but they make entirely too much over guilt and not enough over trying. Besides guilt is in the past, and I do not live in the past. That's like waiting to get nuked as my son in the tennis shorts with the twelve dollars worth of steaks would say. One day we will all learn that it's best not to know what's coming.

For the first time in years, I thought about Wayne's daddy. I wondered if he still bowled. It was possible that he was living a very upright life. Not likely but possible. It seemed that I had no more influence on Wayne than his daddy had. His daddy could even be dead. I had not thought of that when I came across his bowling ball in the hall closet.

I went to the telephone and dialed Wentworth. "Could you tell me if you have a listing for a Woodrow Ames?" I said. They didn't, so I went through all the towns on Woodrow's route sheet just as if it were still there on the table.

"I have a W. T. Ames," the operator in Rocky Mount said in that clackety voice they have. "You may dial that direct, if you wish."

"Thank you for your trouble," I said. "This is Mrs. Woodrow T. Ames and I seem to have mislaid my number."

I sat there watching the telephone like it had taken sick. Even when the low, low rates went into effect after eleven I did not call.

The one person who would understand why I didn't call would be Farley Craddock. After he had his stomach surgery, I said to him, "Farley, what do they say—what's your prognosis?"

Farley looked at me and said, "To tell the truth, I don't believe I've asked."

Wayne did not come home to even turn down the covers on his bed. It was a long weekend, and if you want to know how long, you just try to eat a six pound picnic ham all by yourself.

Wayne came in with his buddies after work on Monday. He threw up his hand in a little wave but didn't bother to stop. They were pulling things out of the cooler and making a perfect mess out of our buy-one-get-one-free snack display.

Mr. Lummus was in his office above the floor talking to himself quite distracted, his head bobbing as fast as a turkey's wattle. It was just maddening.

Serves you right, I said to myself. Just let them tear the store down and walk away with the pieces. He should have sold this place years ago, *burned* it down, let them have it. The very thing that made me so mad was the thing I liked most about Mr. Lummus. He kept hanging on.

"Just think how nice and peaceful it's going to be in Florida," I called up to Mr. Lummus, trying to soothe him. "I bet you catch an ice chest full of red snappers!"

I kept an eye on Wayne as he made his way to the back of the store. There was Mr. Lummus above me trying to keep an eye on all the mirrors at one time and that little television set was going full tilt. Then my eyes just seemed to disconnect from my brain as they followed Wayne over to the meat counter. I saw Wayne tuck a tray of steaks right between his arm and the six-pack he carried. Just as nonchalant as he could be.

What I wished was that we were watching ourselves on some television show and I could reach over and switch channels. What did flash across my mind as bold as a station's call letters were those gold initials on Wayne's luggage that Mr. Lummus had chipped in on, against his better judgment. When he went along with what I thought was best it was one of those acts of perfect faith the preacher is always talking about, like when he had given me the second key to the bottle-return box months ago.

I had no way of knowing what Wayne was going to do with the steaks—pay for them or try to sneak them out—anymore than I'd had a glimmer of what his father would do when he left that morning with a trunkful of red-letter Bibles, or what Mr. Lummus would do if he ever got his camper van, or even what I would do if I could dance and the Make-Believe Ballroom was real. There is no good way of telling as it is not painted in glo-lite colors. We all just keep on going and surprising ourselves to death along the way. Now there's an act of perfect faith for you, it really is.

"You just take it easy," I called to Mr. Lummus. "I've got it covered from here." Then I pushed my stool back and stood where I could look directly into the mirrors overhead. □

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PREPARATION

Erin McGraw

She knew before anyone else. She could see it when she stretched her leg in arabesque, in the tremendous distance to the floor in *grand plié*. Could see it when she dressed for class, pulling tights up and up over legs that stretched too long. She was too tall. No dancer could be so tall. She was like a skyscraper. At night, waiting to fall asleep, she could feel it happen; everything was lengthening, legs and arms were pulling out into something monstrous. She wondered how long she could continue as if nothing was wrong. She wondered if everyone was watching, wondering just how tall she could get.

She had had no preparation for anything like this, no advance notice. Every year her mother brought her to the doctor who carefully examined her feet and knees. The first time, she'd been six years old, and he told her mother that he saw no reason she shouldn't be a great ballerina, as great as Margot Fonteyn. He might have said as great as Maria Tallchief, if he had known enough. But there was nothing he saw to indicate that she would expand like this; she found that she could now cross the studio in three *jetés*, her legs unfolding like flagpoles.

But still no one saw, or no one realized what they saw, and her mother asked her vaguely why she ducked her head when she went through doorways. Sylvie stood next to her in class, calling out shrilly that she must stretch, must pull through every muscle, but she was afraid that she would stretch out even longer right there in the studio, before them all. She was already working without watching herself in the mirror. *En pointe* she was formidable.

She was beginning to have nightmares of things gone wildly out of control—her house choked like Sleeping Beauty's but herself still awake in it, trying to beat her way through walls of thorns and vines; her mother and Sylvie dancing together on some stage, calling to show her how easy it was, her mother's apron flying around her head when she turned. When she awakened, the house's silence was complete, as if there were no other living thing. Lying still, she heard the music from her mother's and Sylvie's *pas de deux*, and her toes dangled over the end of the bed.

It was not that she actually felt so different—rather that the ground seemed to be shrinking further away from her every day. She began to see things that she had never seen from her lower vantage points. She could see the gray that was coming into her parents' hair. Her mother's sprang out in ugly tufts, but her father's rayed out from his crown, and it looked elfin and beautiful. She saw on shelves things she thought she should remember: mementos of old vacations, a formless copper lump that her father had found on the beach one summer. She picked the things up as she found them, dwarfed them in her long hands, traced the cracks of sea shells or the green seams of the copper paperweight. Why had her mother put these things up so high? She might never have seen them, up so high.

Everything was dirty. Ledges, high surfaces—even the refrigerator had wide stripes of greasy dust across the top. She felt affronted that her house, which she had always thought clean, had secret dust and grime lying over every tall surface. She offered to help her mother one Saturday, telling her she would give the bookshelves a thorough cleaning. Her mother told her not to bother with what no one could see, and reminded her to get ready for class. While she was in her room, she stood on top of a chair and dusted off the doorframe with the sleeve of her sweater.

When she went to the studio she saw things she didn't want to see. The photographs of Sylvie in the Kirov were beginning to crack. Spiders built depths of cobwebs on the high window ledges. Lately there was nothing for her to focus on as she whipped her head around and around in pirouettes; she could see only the blank plaster above the mirror, and her turns were a lost confusion of whiteness with no center. She knew she would have to put a mark up high on the wall, something to give her direction, but she could not make herself do it. She imagined mark after mark climbing up the wall, high above anyone else's head. How much longer, then, before they would see and understand and keep her from coming back? So she continued to turn dizzily in the whiteness, and Sylvie chided her for falling off *pointe*.

As she grew, sounds seemed to recede; most talk became a generalized muttering that she could ignore. But Sylvie's voice traveled up with her, becoming shriller the higher it went. "Do it again," Sylvie would say when she did something perfectly. "If you're a dancer, you do it perfectly every time."

She always came to the studio in her practice clothes, so there was time for her to stretch before class. Usually she didn't even go into the dressing room, just dropped her coat in a corner, under the piano. But one day she was rushed and had to leave her house quickly, her ballet clothes under her arm in a loose bundle. When she came into the dressing room the other girls looked up at her,

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stilled for a moment, and then moved to make room on the narrow bench. She looked down until the conversation began to creep back, talk full of school and boys' names. The girls talked in quick counterpoint, full of confidence. Was it always like this? she wondered. It seemed wrong to bring this warm, bubbling talk into the studio where she came to dance every day. She dressed quietly, hoping the others would not notice how long it took her to dress or how tiny they seemed next to her. They stood together at the mirror, pinning up their hair and laughing. She swept together her hairpins and fled into the studio, using the practice mirror to fix her long hair in place.

While the studio was still empty she began to warm up, standing at the *barre* and beginning with *pliés*, taking her time because she was alone. She sank to the floor, forcing her back straight and her knees out, working the long muscles again and again until perspiration came. She kept working as the other girls and Sylvie came in, working through each exercise and forcing her body to assume and maintain the unnatural, beautiful positions. Sometimes it was best for her like this—not even dancing, just the preparation, seeing in her mind's eye the perfection of the movement.

Sylvie came and stood behind her. "*Legato, legato,*" Sylvie murmured, and she slowed even more, measure after measure to reach the floor, and a full ten counts to rise. She could hear the other girls giggling and imagined how she looked, knees jabbing out on either side of her body. She paused then, waiting for Sylvie to say something. She waited for Sylvie to tell her that she couldn't hope to dance with such a body, but Sylvie just nodded and clapped her hands to begin the class.

The *barre* progressed as always. The exercises were ritual, and she took comfort from the steady progression of movement that had been set out a hundred years before. Every exercise prepared for the next, until her body hummed. Sylvie walked back and forth across the studio, beating time loudly with her cane. "Precision," she cried at one girl, tapping at her legs with the cane. "The movements must be precise. They must be precise *every time.*" No one, that day, satisfied her, and Sylvie counted aloud harshly, as if she could chant the wavering line of legs and arms into unison. Listening to Sylvie, she worked faster and faster, until the brittle, tiny kicks and beats blurred in her vision, and Sylvie stood behind her and pounded time on the wooden floor. When the music ended, Sylvie turned to face the class, holding the cane before her menacingly.

"Nothing is more important than rhythm," she told them. "Precise rhythm. It is not only performing the movement, it is excluding every other movement. You—" she gestured at the class, her hand loose at the end of her wrist, "—you are all any place, as if you don't hear music at all. Dance is chained to music, do you understand? There is always music, even if there is no music. If you can't hear it, get out. There is no dancer in you." Listening to Sylvie, she looked straight ahead, out the window. The spiders were running nimbly over their webs, their long legs angled sharply.

"There was once," Sylvie went on, "when I was performing, a girl in our company. She rode on top of any music, a part of it so much that the critics could not separate her from it. By herself, that girl, she made music and dance a single thing." She glared at them. "What is remarkable is, she was deaf. She heard not a note of the music. But her understanding it was so great that she danced it precisely—better than all of us, who could hear everything." She looked around at the girls and gathered up breath as if to speak again, but instead pointed with the cane. "Now. Again, please."

The music started. "Beat. Beat. *Listen* to the music. *Use* it." Sylvie came back and stood behind her. "Beat. Beat. Faster. Don't struggle. Let the music do for you." But she already knew that the music could do nothing for her. Sylvie had no stories about dancers who transcended their legs. She closed her eyes and concentrated, but all she could imagine was her own figure ludicrously expanded, eight feet tall, ten feet tall, on top of *pointe* shoes like boats, clumsily stabbing at the little kicks. When she opened her eyes the class was watching her, and she stopped. Sylvie didn't say anything, and they moved on to *ronds de jambe.*

After class Sylvie caught her by the elbow. "You are all of a sudden trying too hard. This is not difficult for you. Relax. If you can envision yourself dancing correctly, you will dance correctly."

Sometimes, in her dreams, she *did* see herself dancing correctly, perfectly, as she had always assumed she would: exquisite and hard, jeweled. She could see the audience as she danced and watch herself from the orchestra at the same time, her own figure as stark as a music-box ballerina. She kept dancing perfectly no matter what happened. Scenery crashed, the orchestra hit sour notes, the other dancers forgot their cues and bumped into each other, but she went on dancing perfectly, like steel, at the front of the stage. The bravos of the audience reached the heavens, and she danced on and on.

When she went home that afternoon she found an old family photo album on the shelf with the encyclopedias. It was full of pictures she didn't remember—pictures of her with her first ballet teacher and studio portraits from her recitals, her face in every instance distant and dreamy. Her mother still told the story of the first time she took her to a ballet. It was *The Sleeping Beauty.* Her mother said she sat forward in the velour theater seat and never moved while the performance went on. When her mother leaned over to tell her something, she was rigid; at intermission she refused even to move from the seat and never took her eyes off the red curtain—as if she could bring the dancers back again by will and devotion. Then, her mother said, she knew there would have to be lessons. *I knew*, her mother said, *that my daughter was a dancer.*

She kept flipping through the album. Stills of her as an extra in *Giselle, Coppélia*, the annual *Nutcracker.* Pictures of her family—her mother struggling to be fashionable; her mother and father together, both of them smiling glassy, public smiles. One picture taken by Sylvie after a recital, parents standing beside her, careful not to crush her tutu, and herself looking quietly into the camera.

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She remembered that recital, the crowd of parents and friends that had rushed backstage afterward, watching coolly as people whispered and pointed and smiled at her. Her father—she only came to his shoulder then—had hugged her so hard he pressed greasepaint onto the coarse wool of his jacket. "You were so beautiful," he said. "I couldn't believe you were anyone's daughter. This really is your life, isn't it?" She pulled away to look at him, honestly surprised. "What else could I do?"

She looked on the shelf for some other album. She wanted terribly to find pictures taken before she was dancing. She wanted to see herself laughing, or crying, to recover something from a time when she did not seem to be tapping out some unheard rhythm. But the albums began when she had already seen the ballet and everything was understood. Every picture was careful and beautiful.

She felt nervous, filled with humming, spiraling energy. She got up abruptly and went downstairs. When she had gone on *pointe*, her father had remade the whole basement, telling her shyly that it was all he could think of to do for her. It had been a makeshift family room, and he had taken out the television and sling chairs, lined one whole wall with mirrors and bought a *barre* from a supply house Sylvie had told him about. Here she did her exercises on Sundays, when there were no classes, and here she worked out the intricacies of new combinations. It was her room entirely; after her father had finished varnishing the floor and plugged in the record player, no one came down. She had added nothing except a box of resin in the corner. She liked the spareness of the room, having only herself to concentrate on in the mirror.

Half-heartedly, she walked into the center. She began to work on pirouettes, her tennis shoes squeaking and resisting on the polished wood. One. Two. On the third she stuttered across the floor out of control, then faced the mirror again. *You do it perfectly every time.* She worked for ten minutes, the tennis shoes squealing, until her breath came harder and she had done ten perfectly. It was not enough. The jittery nervousness was strung through her like wires, and she tossed her practice clothes onto the floor and left again.

On her way upstairs she called out, even though she knew by the silence that she was alone. The kitchen was cluttered, the breakfast dishes in a careless heap in the sink, crumbs on the table. She wondered how long her mother had been gone, wondered if perhaps she could catch up with her, go shopping with her, stop somewhere for a sundae. Even though her mother would look puzzled, she wanted to be with her. It was not right or usual for her to be like this after a class, as if she had not already spent two hours in the studio dancing until tears came.

She worked her fingers over the table's surface, pushing the crumbs into piles. She wanted to feel things, press them. Going into the living room, she paced the edges of it, trailing her fingertips over surfaces, writing her name in the dust on the mantel. She felt no part of the room or the house, and the only sound she heard was the rhythm of her own movement, quiet steps and the brush of skin over wood and glass. And so she walked faster around and around, like a horse on a short lead, her fingertips skimming and racing over tables and walls, touching plaster and upholstery and varnish until she came again to the front door and then ran outside smoothly, as if to music, as if she had been planning to run out the front door all along.

It was cool outside, and although she wasn't dressed for it, she kept running. Lately it seemed that she was cold all the time, only comfortable while she was moving. She knew that she had gotten so tall that her skin was stretched tight all over her body and there was nothing left to keep her warm. She couldn't stretch much tighter; she examined her waist at night, expecting to see signs that the skin was splitting where it had been stretched too far.

She was unaccustomed to running, and it felt pleasant to be moving through the quiet afternoon. She was alone on the street—it was time now for people to be indoors. She watched her spindly shadow moving ahead of her, her shadow head half a block in front. Perhaps she could become a great athlete—a jumper, a runner. She saw herself running with great ease, the terrible legs reaching out and over the ground. Saw herself hurdling over stiles, fences, her head thrown back, her body *en attitude*. Imagined running silkily through the woods where she had danced when she was a little girl on vacation with her family.

She enjoyed the cadence of her feet on the pavement and thought the street looked different to her, as if she were a stranger. She could keep running and all the neighborhoods would look like this, with swing sets and hydrangeas. She could keep running and no one would see her. It was so easy. As she approached the crest of a small hill she looked at the houses on the higher slopes in front of her. A few of them she knew, a few of them held the girls she danced with, or once had danced with. But as she ran on with her shadow stretching up endlessly over the hill, the houses looked strange and closed to her, all of them making up one facade.

It was getting late; cars passed her going into the tangle of streets and neighborhoods. The sun was coming down hard behind her, extending her long shadow, and a wind had sprung up—it was already too cold to be out without a jacket. But she kept running, light on her feet, as if she had some purpose or right.

She rarely came into town at this time of day. The small stores were closing, rolling down steel mesh in front of their display windows. She began to run in time with the growing traffic, swinging herself forward in long strides. Running like this, in the tempo of the town, she was inconspicuous: no one looked up at her as she went by. People were backing out of shops, hurrying to cars or buses. She thought that they all looked alike, moved alike, in the same time. It was easy to fall in with them. When she had been one of the villagers in *Giselle*, the director had spent days with the corps, working over every gesture to make sure they looked like real villagers, and like each other. He should have sent us into town, she thought. We would have understood just by walking down the street.

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The cold was edging into her joints. She clenched her hands to warm the icy fingertips and kept loping down the sidewalk between groups of people. Streetlights were coming on, and she seemed to be the only person going *into* town, plunging down the main street with her fingers rolled up tight against the cold. She knew she should be going home. There was no allowance for this, for running straight into the night, but she didn't slow or turn. She felt as if she were dancing; she couldn't stop without finishing the phrase. You do it perfectly every time.

At the far end of town was the movie theater. She saw the bright lights blinking around the marquee and the line of people outside, stamping their feet against the cold. Her parents came here sometimes, she knew; her mother would dress up and laugh about having a date. She stopped running. No one looked at her as she joined the end of the line.

She peered over the heads of the people at the poster outside the theater doors. A man with graying hair was holding a woman who seemed ready to break away or perhaps to pull him closer—she couldn't tell. None of the others in line were looking at the poster; probably they knew what the movie was about, knew what to expect. The wind, now that she had stopped moving, whipped around her and penetrated her thin shirt, and she shivered and hugged herself, hunching over like those ahead of her. When the line moved sluggishly forward, she moved with it. She felt safe, as if by standing in the line no one could see her, how tall she was. No one around her was talking; all she heard was the rhythm of wind and stamping feet. People were pulling their jackets and coats tighter. She would turn across the stage in bursts to show how it felt, *piqués* and *tours jetés* in jagged diagonals toward the audience. A gust of wind whipped hair into her eyes. When she brushed it away, the line had advanced again.

She was almost at the box office. She could see the poster clearly now: the passion in the man's face, some kind of longing in the woman's. She stared until she realized that the person in line ahead of her had already gone in.

She stepped to the window. The cashier, a man, looked at her and waited. Then he said something, impossible to hear on her side of the glassed-in booth. She had no money. She smiled at him, her hands fluttered up, she tried to find the words to explain. Someone jostled her from behind, and the man held up one finger and shrugged. She shook her head, but she didn't move out of line. For a moment, she couldn't move at all. She felt everyone looking up at her, noticing her for the first time; how could she explain what she was doing here? They would never understand when she told them she was dancing. Finally she stepped to one side. She could feel his eyes on her as she moved away, and the looks of those behind her in line. She wanted to leap or turn, to move for these people somehow, but she stayed still, under the marquee, until everyone had gone inside the double doors. Then she began to run. She ran with the wind now, inside of it. She reached her legs out and out, running back faster than she had run away, running back as swiftly as her legs would carry her. □

ROBERTA KOZAK

ON LISTENING

Going north to Connecticut again,
the ground thick with frost disappears
under fog. Staten Island glitters and dreams.

In the Ford, we're no different:
I dream of driving one day, my mother wakes
saying her favorite sister's name, and my father,

who doesn't know what he wants, fights with us
for peace and quiet and finally gets it.
The cruise they will never take is all their talk.

My sisters and I count the bodies of deer
tied to cars returning from upstate.
they nose the wind at random, heads twisted.

in the final attitude of listening.
We're still counting when the car stops, and my aunt
makes us pile our bags on the stairs,

sends us out. Exploring a hill with my cousin
and his friends, the feeling that I'm a deer
comes without thought. I'm fourteen, just inside

understanding. The boy who wraps his hand
so tightly around mine this season
will leave without fail.

The secret is that I know I'm right
and don't think to say it.
Down the throat of the tangled hedge

where younger children believe witches conjure,
my parents' deaths are brewing.
But how can these same hedges fail to please

when the boy pulls me nearer,
and we too disappear, an island
made forgetful by fog? When we lie in wait,

breaking the frost ferns with our backs
and broken by them in turn,
the leaves fall whispering to each other.

Their voices are most audible when they speak
of the weather, of falling
before it caught them up.

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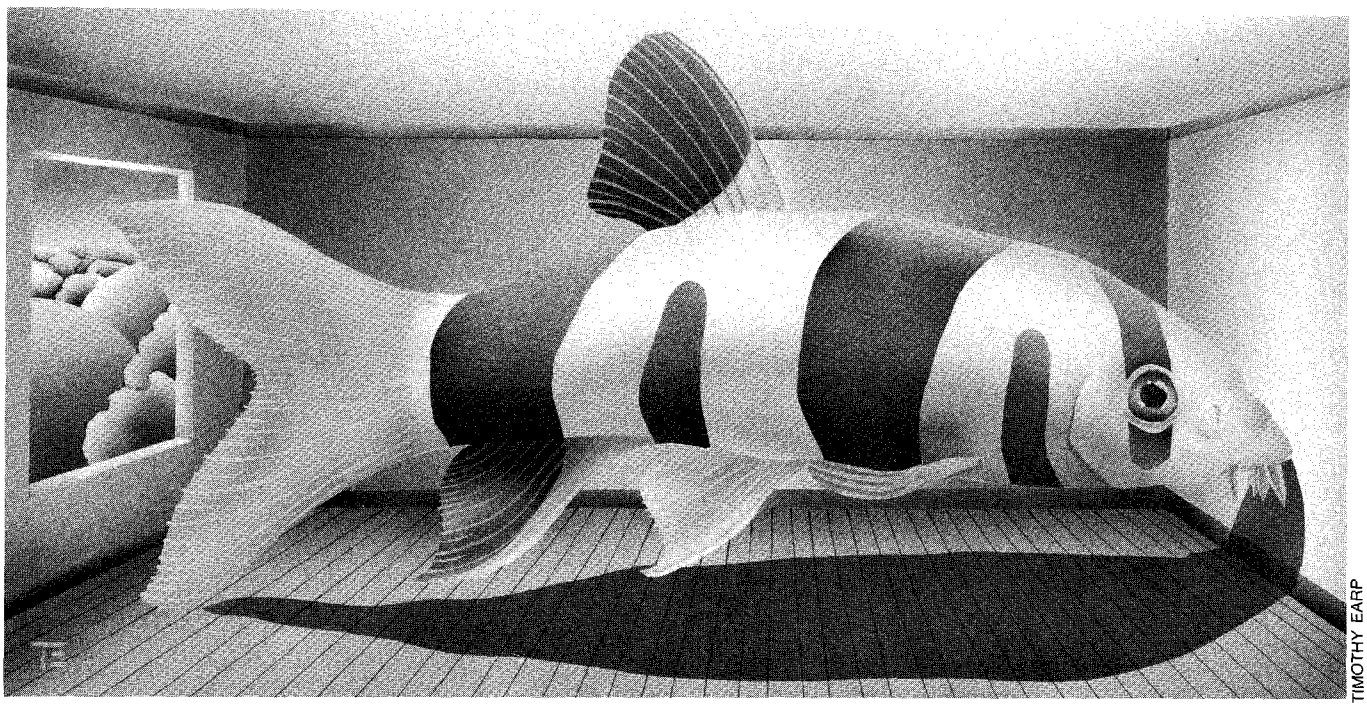

TIMOTHY EARP

Patricia Stoll

THE AGE OF FISH

Chapter X
From: A History of Civilization

Où sont les cannibales d'aujourd-hui?
—*NiceGénéral*

The U.S. Supreme Court, twenty years earlier, had decided that women could not be forced to bear their unborn children; now the court ruled that they couldn't kill them either. This paradox was to be resolved by the American scientific community with all deliberate speed.

The government flooded scientific research laboratories with unlimited funding, and within eighteen months the answer was found (along with cures for acne, schizophrenia, AIDS, and three kinds of cancer): the regressive gill-gene vaccine. The vaccine acted on the principle that a human foetus, at one point in its development, has gills. When a pregnancy was interrupted (a law passed in 1997 forbade the use of the word *abortion* because of its negative connotations), the foetus was injected with the gill-gene vaccine. The foetus retained its gills and was placed in a large, communal aquarium to continue its prenatal development *in vitro*. Seven-odd months later, technicians fished the fully-developed baby out of the water, slapped its bottom to make it breathe air, and it was "born."

As soon as this technique was more or less perfected, the government put an end to old-fashioned "abortion," and required that all "interrupted pregnancies" be processed through the new aquariums, which began service in January of 1996. Soon the tanks of drifting babies, blowing bubbles up to the surface of the water, peering through the glass at visitors, were a common hospital sight.

In September of 1996, the first "gill-children" were born: 127,466 of them. In October, 128,932. In November, 130,003; *ad inf.*[1]

No one knew what to do with them.

In the early 'nineties, when Right-to-Lifers had been immolating themselves on the White House steps, demanding an end to abortion, they swore there were thousands, millions, of loving families waiting to take in these unwanted babies, willing to adopt them and to raise them as their own. However, when prospective foster parents found out these babies had gills, they balked.

The gills were hard, iridescent, oval protuberances, each the size of an oyster shell, one on either side of the neck. They were, perhaps, no uglier than a navel (which the gill-children did not have), but the gills were a telling, visible mark of difference. "Each life is precious," the Right-to-Lifers had chanted, but apparently a life with a

[1]Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstracts of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: GPO 1996), pp. 78-82. All further population statistics are from this source unless otherwise indicated. Access code: CENSSTAT.

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gill on either side of its neck was not. Government nurseries and orphanages filled up with these peculiar children.

As the government took on the legal guardianship of the foundlings, it was soon immersed in the joys and cares of new parenthood. The gill-children were graceful and lovely, as all water creatures are, and oddly mature for their age, having led conscious and sensate communal lives since shortly after conception. They were strangely aloof, yet could not bear to be left alone, and slept in piles of five and six in a single bed. It was difficult to keep clothes on them, and to teach them table manners, and they had to be watched carefully in the bath, lest they duck under water to try their now useless gills, and drown.

The costs of rearing these millions of children were staggering. Emergency taxes were levied to pay for their food, clothing, and housing; their toys, medical care, child-care technicians. Perspicacious political observers pointed out, down the road, the specter of baseball gloves, music lessons, orthodontia, and graduate school.

Even the naming of such a multitude of offspring was a major undertaking. Each child's first name was drawn at random from a list of the three hundred most common given names. The middle name was supplied by a computer programmed to invent words which resembled but did not duplicate any known names. The last name was invariably the code name of the hospital where the child was born. Thus: John Tef CookCo; Mary Zenq StLuke.

One result of this naming method was that the three hundred most common given names immediately went out of favor with parents of "dryland" children, and soon only gill-children bore the familiar euphonious names, while dryland children had to make do with the archaic (Hepsibah, Makepeace, Jephthah) and the fanciful (Skylark, LaMelle).

In an increasing number of subtle and overt ways, everyone shunned the gill-children, and this was odd, because people realized that they might be discriminating against one of their own children. All official efforts to integrate these children into the mainstream of life failed. By September of 2003, the government had more than ten million ugly ducklings on its hands, nearly two million of them ready to enter first grade.

The government bused them to suburban schools where, it was hoped, they would assimilate.

All over the country, school boards attempted intricate legal maneuvers to keep the gill-children out of their school districts. Teachers and administrators went on strike, demanding double pay. Thousands of families pulled their children out of the public schools and started private academies. The gill-children, complained parents and teachers alike, had no interest in dryland culture; they were violent, dirty, had low morals and short attention spans, and consistently scored a full year below grade level on reading tests.

The gill-children were dubbed "fish," a hated epithet; dryland children went out in gangs to fight them. Gang fights were called "going fishing." Spray-painted pictures of fish on hooks appeared on brick walls.

Soon gill-children began, defiantly, to call themselves "fish," and called dryland children "bait." Terrifying Fish gangs sprang up; bloody battles ensued; atrocities were committed; police were hired to patrol school corridors and to ride shotgun on school buses.

As the gill-children grew up (they now preferred to be called Fish, with the capital *F*), more problems developed. Even with college educations, most Fish could find employment only as dishwashers or janitors and in other low-paying jobs without public contact. In vain, the government launched a massive anti-discrimination campaign,[2] and tried to coerce employers into hiring Fish: with equal opportunity laws, affirmative action laws, tax credits. Finally, quotas were imposed: by January of 2025, 10% of all employees, on all levels, had to be Fish.[3]

Nationwide strikes ensued, resulting in a number of shootings, maimings, dismemberments, and several fatalities. The National Guard (38% of whom were Fish) was called in.

Science once again came to the rescue. In 2023, Dr. Joanna Vol Southshore, a young Fish scientist, developed a drug which revived defunct gills, making Fish amphibious, and thus able to breathe either air or water.

Immediately, underwater employment opportunities opened up to Fish: all aspects of hands-on oceanography, underwater construction and farming, and newly created jobs in underwater entertainment, education, recreation, law enforcement, child-care, law, medicine. One of the most lucrative jobs for unskilled Fish labor was employment on the off-shore oil rigs, where men and women alike earned starting salaries of $245 an hour, four times the national average. One of the government's early Aid to Dependent Fish programs had granted Fish 100% disability status, so that they paid zero taxes. This status was discontinued in the late 'twenties, the government finally deciding, over the protests of a strong Fish lobby, that anyone earning $245 an hour was not disabled, but not before a large number of Fish had become extremely wealthy and had bought up most of the valuable real estate in many seacoast cities and towns.

Suddenly Fish were In. They were rich, and young, and beautiful; suddenly business was interested in capturing the Fish market.

The population shifted to the South and to the coasts. Housing starts leaped 20% a year, necessitated by the sudden increase in population. Luxury condomiums were built in the Gulf of Mexico along the Florida Keys. These became prototypes for the so-called "Great Barrier Reef of Condos," the ruins of which may still be seen along the coast of Texas.

Underwater fashion was a growth industry. Department stores installed underwater display windows and dressing rooms. Clothes were designed to look equally good wet or dry. Since Fish spent so much time swim-

[2]See *A Fish Could Be Somebody's Brother: Pro-Fish Propaganda 2000-2023*, ed. James Gak WhiteCross and Kyoko Atallah-Diaz (New York: Random House, 2097). Access code: WHATFISH.

[3]One provision of the Equal Employment Opportunity for Fish (EEOF) law; passed October 2023 over President Kennedy's veto, who stated prophetically, "If this bill becomes law, blood will flow in the streets." "ZFK Vetos EEOF," *New York Times*, 1 October 2023, p. 1.

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ming, their bodies were muscular and sleek and they looked wonderful in these skimpy, clinging fashions, which were always cut low to reveal the gills.

Drylanders imitated Fish styles, but with little success. Many tried to create gills on their necks with makeup and plastic surgery, but an artificially-created gill lacked the opalescent beauty of the real thing.

Almost overnight, the new movie stars in Hollywood were Fish—except for a few old-time character actors who were usually cast as villains and/or killed off early in the film. New television genres evolved—the underwater cop drama, the underwater soap opera, the underwater docudrama, the underwater miniseries—and defunct series were recreated with Fish casts: "The Six Million Dollar Fish," "Charlie's Angel Fish," "F*I*S*H." Fish music groups emerged: CARP (reggae revival); The Elvers (folk); and Boy Fish (nouveau rock) among the vanguard; popular dance kept pace: underwater discos date from this era.

Time Magazine's 2024 "Man of the Year" cover honored "The Fish," depicted in a controversial painting of the neo-realistic school which showed two young Fish—male and female—raising clenched fists in the age-old symbolic gesture of revolution.[4]

Women gradually became aware of an obvious fact: they could take advantage of aquarium technology. They could interrupt a pregnancy and keep the child themselves. The advantages of this were obvious: a woman did not have to carry the child for nine months, spoil her figure, endure the pains of childbirth, take time off work, pay an obstetrician. She could, if she chose, complete her entire family in one year, by starting several fertilized ova in quick succession. And, perhaps best of all, her children would be Fish.

Suddenly there were more Fish babies than dryland babies. From 2025 to 2030, 42,783,549 babies were born in the United States, 40,583,420 of them Fish.[5]

(A few people, for religious reasons, still practiced old-style pregnancy. These included the Old Order Amish, a few die-hard Roman Catholics—though the Pope had blessed the aquarium method in 2005—and members of a cult called the *Lamaze*, who made a sacrament of childbirth.)

The whole world might have become amphibious in two or three generations if it had not been for the census of 2030, the first time that skin-sensor analysis had been attempted on a grand scale. In addition to asking the usual factual questions about number of cars, pets, refrigerators, television sets, toilets, etc., the government distributed electrodes to be clamped to a ring finger and plugged directly into the home computer terminal for fifteen seconds. At this early date, only a limited amount of information could be extrapolated from skin sensor data: perceptual and emotional acuity, sexual preference, intelligence, psychological profile, chemical makeup, musical ability and dream patterns, among others. But even with this limited input, census analysts were able to draw some startling conclusions about the American people.

Many of the findings from the 2030 census seem commonplace now: 62% of the population had low-grade lead poisoning; people with type A blood had longer and more colorful dreams than people with type B blood; in any given nine-hour period, 97.32% of the population had at least one thought about onions; and so on.[6] But at the time, the report created a sensation.

The most controversial findings had to do with the Fish. The report revealed that, while in most aspects Fish appeared to be equal or superior to dryland individuals, there was overwhelming evidence of a serious congenital flaw in the psycho-moral-emotional makeup of the eighty-five million American Fish.

The report addressed itself to, and confirmed, the commonly held belief that Fish tended to be cold-blooded, even cruel, with little regard for others. "The folk expression, 'cold as a fish's kiss' seems to have some validity," unofficially opined census bureau chief Zygmunt Kaspryzyska.[7]

In the past, it had been believed that Fish tended to be emotionally detached because they had been raised in government orphanages and thus had not known the nurturing care of a loving mother and father, and the normal home life that is every child's rightful heritage. But analysts studied data gathered from 17,388 Fish who had been adopted at birth and raised by apparently loving parents who had given them every advantage, and found that even these privileged Fish were characteristically aloof. Even as toddlers, they had preferred the company of their fellows to any kind of normal home life.

Moreover, there was mounting evidence of more serious social disorientation. Correlational studies of the census information, demography, crime statistics, and popular culture since the turn of the century, made it increasingly clear that a significant percentage of Fish, from all walks of life, were cannibals.[8]

[4]Kathleen Community, *Fish Power*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[5]For statistics on Fish worldwide see Louis P. NiceGénéral, *Une Histoire Courte Des Poissons* (Paris: Libraire Plon, 2071). NiceGénéral's monumental, though dated, study remains a necessary starting point for the student of global Fish history. Access code: NICEFISH.

[6]For complete readout of 2030 census data: Access code CENS2030. Persons with casual interest are recommended to *Understanding the 2030 Census: A Layman's Guide*, eds. Susan Trin StFrancis, Thomas J. Wilson, Jr., and F.X.C. Hagan-Nguyen (New York: Random House, 2031). Access code: UNDERCEN.

[7]Kasprzyska was officially censured for making this remark (on "Face the Nation," July 14, 2031), considered by all to be an ethnic slur, and he was demoted to head of the Environmental Protection Agency on August 1 of that year.

[8]From the beginning, the government, sensitive to unfortunate connotations inherent in the word "cannibal," tried to encourage use of the more scientific and exact term *anthropophagus* (pl *anthropophagi*) in its place. The cumbersome word never entered common usage, however, and now is found only in medical terminology and in certain early scholarly studies, e.g., Leon Rav MtSinai, "Anthropophagistically-Oriented Physical Education Programs in Three Dallas Junior High Schools," *Education Today*, 45 (2032), pp. 325-370.

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Indeed, it was probable that *all* Fish, even the vast majority who were productive and law-abiding citizens, had latent cannibalistic tendencies, kept more or less in check by social pressures and learned moral standards—restraints that would naturally decrease in strength as the population became more predominantly Fish, and would lead inexorably to a cannibalistic bloodbath and perhaps the end of civilization in its present form.

Controversial as the report was, it only confirmed what had been common knowledge for years. Parents and teachers knew: Fish children had to be closely supervised; the game of "doctor" had given way to "shark," with sometimes unfortunate results; childish fights often ended with teeth marks on victor and vanquished alike. Psychiatrists knew: patients complaining of anthropophagic *angst* were increasing in number, as were scholarly articles about the phenomenon in learned journals of psychology and sociology. The police knew: magazines, films, and latex novelties catering to cannibalistic fantasies were sold in the seedier adult bookstores and massage parlors, and violent crimes involving cannibalism had been on the increase for some years, ranging from the usual Saturday-night husband-wife assault/murder, to the dread Piranha gangs that roamed streets and subway platforms and set upon hapless citizens, leaving behind nothing but piles of bones.

When the government recognized these sociopathic cultural phenomena, and pointed an official finger at their probable cause, research laboratories went to work on the Cannibal Crisis.

Meanwhile, on the streets, cannibalism was suddenly chic.

Business recognized a new, affluent consumer market and went for it. Clothing, makeup, automobiles, home furnishings, health spas, movies and TV shows, and restaurants, all catering to the cannibal taste, proliferated and flourished. Cannibal movies became as common as westerns had been seventy-five years before. Cannibal magazines appeared on the newsstands: *SweetMeat, Jaws, Eat Me, Long Pig*. Conventional magazines featured cannibal articles to boost circulation: *Parents'* Magazine, June 2033: "Understanding Your Little Cannibal from Two to Four"; *Family Circle*, July 2033: "Best Cannibal Recipes for Summer"; *Playboy*, October 2033: "Cannibal Playmate of the Month." Literature and art reeked with cannibalistic image, symbol, and metaphor. Cannibalism was the new eroticism.

Even dryland people took it up. Though most had no taste for the aberration, many felt they should keep up with the times. Claiming to suffer from latent anthropophagia, many young drylanders frequented cannibal bars and discos and took to wearing tiny silver knives and forks on chains around their necks. Cannibalism workshops sprang up on the coasts. Typical ads (in *The Village Voice*, 4 September 2033):

> Dial-a-Cannibal: Sex over the phone with Shirley and Diane. "The Ultimate Orgasm." Credit cards.
>
> Cannibal Runners: expand your performance through Holistic Nutritional Awareness. Omophagia Institute.
>
> Gay Cannibals for Jesus.
>
> The Tao of Cannibalism. Workshop Saturday 9-5. Lunch served.

The cannibal craze was short-lived. In 2034 the scientific community released its long-awaited report, which stated definitely that Fish family life (or lack of it) was not the cause of cannibalism. Apparently, human beings required the experience of being carried about in a womb for nine months, and of a more or less traumatic birth, in order to develop such qualities of concern for others as kindness, mercy, and the distaste for human flesh which our society has traditionally held sacred.

The report recommended an immediate moratorium on aquarium implants. For the future of mankind, it would be necessary for women to return to the old-fashioned method of giving birth.

The government's plan for the changeover involved intensive dissemination of birth control information; emergency training of obstetricians and midwives; and classes in biological reproduction for young women—many of whom had never seen a pregnant woman—introducing them to the procedures involved in pregnancy and childbirth.

Some of the plan went smoothly.

A safe, effective, and free method of contraception had been available for almost ten years (a method similar to the biofeedback-meditation technique now taught to both sexes in fourth grade), but had been practiced in a desultory way. The government disseminated this technique to the entire population in less than a month through daily television programs; classes in schools, workplaces, doctors' offices, department stores; loudspeakers on street corners; door-to-door volunteers; and home computers (Code: NONO/HELP).

The pregnancy and childbirth classes for women were less successful. In October of 2034, all females between the ages of eleven and forty-eight were required to go to designated public auditoriums and meeting places where an educational film, *Wouldn't You Really Rather Have A Baby*? was shown, and an obstetrician lectured and answered questions. The slogan for the resistance movement which followed was sounded in Washington, D.C., by an eighteen-year-old second-generation Fish woman, who stood up in the middle of a lecture on morning sickness, stretch marks, labor pains and episiotomies, and shouted "You want me to do WHAT?"[9]

In October an estimated 92% of the female population went on strike. For more than a month, women did no work, cooked no food, washed no dishes, provided no child care, cleaned no aquariums, permitted no sex. President Shimizu appealed directly to the strikers. Grandmother of seven Fish, she empathized with the young women whom she called upon to make this patriotic sacrifice for their country *in foro conscientiae*. When her words failed to move the women, she joined the picket lines herself. In forty-three days, the country was brought to its knees.

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[9]See SacredHeart Roth, et al, *You Want Us To Do WHAT? An Oral History of the 2034 Women's Revolution* (Detroit: Garden City Publishers, 2045).

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History has shown the strike settlement to be a fair one, though it was protested bitterly at the time by feminists who called it a return to the dark ages. Effective immediately, women who chose to bear children were given Civil Service rank, salary, benefits, and pensions. In addition, the U.S. Department of Women's Affairs was created, as a cabinet level agency in charge of the health and welfare of women and infants. The USDW, which proved to be a powerful agency, second only to the Department of Agriculture, effectively mandated the scientific community to study and find cures for the age-old problems of women: the ills of pregnancy and pains of childbirth; menstrual disorders and menopause; sexual dysfunction, rape and spousal abuse, cellulite, housework.

The following year, 2035, there were only 272,051 live births. In 2036 the number rose to nearly 500,000; within ten years the birth rate stabilized at nearly three million per year, about one-third of what it had been during the peak aquarium years.

The next forty years were truly the Age of Fish, the most tumultuous chapter in our nation's history; nay, in the history of our planet. Then, slowly but inevitably the Fish aged, grew less active, and were no longer a majority. Though still cannibalistic, they were too old and tired to do much about it. They stayed home and watched "Eat My Flesh" on the late show and dreamed of the old days. Cannibalism was under control and became only one aberration among many in a pluralistic society.

Now only a few Fish survive; they are wheeled out on state occasions, like old Middle East War veterans. They have not aged well. The men in particular, after the age of about seventy, resemble old bullhead catfish: their mouths grow wider, their eyes smaller, their whiskers thicker, their teeth sharper. Parental warnings to the young to "Keep your distance from Uncle Harry" have teeth in them.

The Age of Fish will be studied, perhaps forever, in institutions of higher learning. Twenty-seven state universities have government-endowed Fish fellowships and Cannibal chairs;[10] there is a growing bibliography on Fish history and culture;[11] and a number of respected scholarly journals specializing in Fish studies.[12]

No people are dead whose art survives, and Fish influence remains strong in art, literature, dance, music, architecture, folklore, and popular culture. Critics agree that the dance has never since reached the perfection attained when it was dominated by underwater Fish dance troupes in the 'forties.[13] Early Fish novels, poetry, stories, plays, and films, with their understated, mysterious cannibal imagery and symbolism, have been judged superior to later, more explicit works.[14] A rich Fish folklore developed and is still being collected and collated into the international folklore motif-index; however, some recent critics have begun to call it derivative.[15]

Fish visual artists have never been accused of timidity and *déjà vu*. HolyCross Smith, *New York Times* art critic, said of the recent Fish Retrospective mounted by the Guggenheim:

> Not since Bosch or Manfredi have such colorful and erotic scenes of violence and mayhem been committed to canvas. It is possible that works by such painters as Ravenswood, CookCo, DallasGen, Lutheran, and CompanyofMary may be among the Fish's most lasting contribution to civilization.[16]

However, it is in the area of popular culture that Fish influence is perhaps most pervasive. Fish motifs are still found in such cultural artifacts as furniture, dishes and silverware, wallpaper, tile and fabric patterns, jewelry, toys, calendars, tattoos, coins, stamps, hair styles, musical instruments; in the names of automobiles, perfumes, magazines, cosmetics, sporting goods, patent medicines, streets, suburbs, parks, and in the names we give our children; in social and religious rituals—weddings, baptisms, funerals—and cast in the façades and ornament of buildings, bridges, and public works. The recent traffic in Fish antiques leads one to believe that Fish artifacts will endure. Fifteen million vermeil copies of the 14 kt. shark ring and carp brooch of the Guggenheim Fish Retrospective were sold in the museum gift shop, thus effectively perpetuating the motifs into the next century.[17]

And Fish influence lingers in another dimension, at once more subtle and more profound: psychologists report that cannibal fantasies, dreams, and symbols survive in the unconscious of the Fish's children, grandchildren, and greatgrandchildren, and offer the opinion that Fish archetypal symbols are perhaps passed on through the genes and have become part of the universal shared unconscious of mankind (access code: FISHOVERSOUL).

One wonders if it could happen again: a capricious government edict, an unforeseen result, civilization on the brink, mankind forever changed. Lest we forget, the Fish flag flies at the United Nations, forever at half-mast; near, but set apart from the national flags: a flying fish, rampant, on a field of scarlet, with a silver stake driven through its heart, *bar sinister*. □

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[10]Access code: FISHUNIV.

[11]Access code: FISHBIBL.

[12]See especially *New York Review of Fish*, Columbia University; and *Cannibal Quarterly*, Key West College. Access codes: FISHNYRF, FISHCANQ; general access code: FISHMAGS.

[13]See Keokuk Baryshnikov, ed., *Four Symposia on Postmodern Fish Dance* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2083). Access code: FISHDANCE.

[14]See *I Wonder Where We Can Go Now: Twenty Critical Essays on the Rhetoric of Cannibalism*, eds. MtSinai DiCarlo, Daybreak McGuire, Jr., and Lakeview Riverside (New York: McMillan, 2099). Access code: FISHCRIT.

[15]See Melissa Edgewater Chan, "Little-Red-Bathing-Suit and the Shark," *North Carolina Folklore*, 97 (Feb. 2078), pp. 7-15. Access code: FISHFOLK.

[16]Quoted in *One Hundred Years of Fish: Catalog of the 2097 Fish Retrospective*, ed. Najat StAnne-Zion and Resurrection Schneidhorst (New York: Cetus Press, 2097), p. viii. Access codes: GUGGFISH.

[17]Cataloging and indexing of Fish popular culture is not yet complete and is a fertile field for the scholar. General access codes: FISHBIBL, FISHCULT, FISHHELP. Or look for information under specific headings: FISHHAIR, FISHWEDD, FISHTOYS, FISHDISH, etc.

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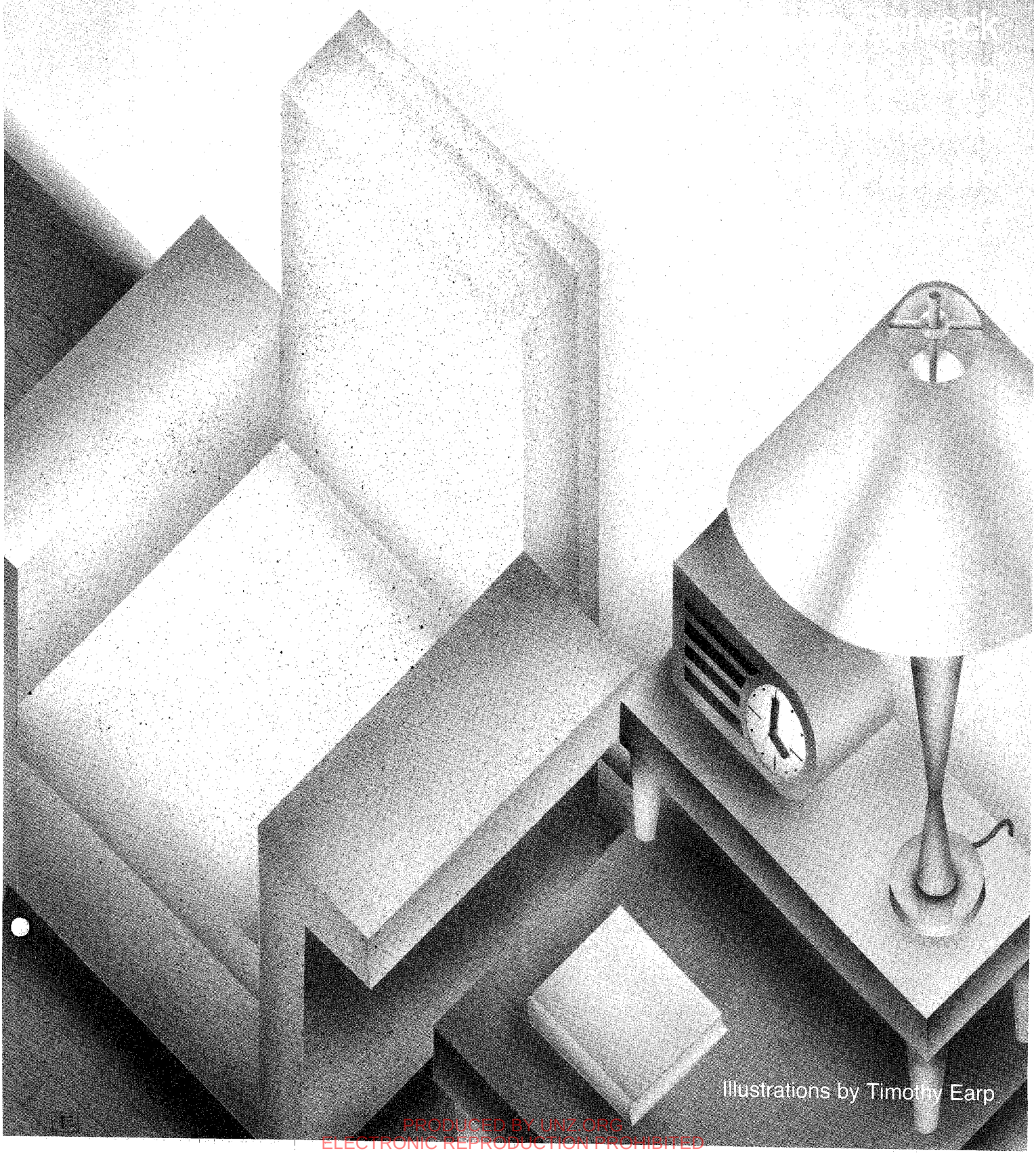
THE 4 MINUTE SHORT STORY

EXPERIMENTAL REVIVAL



Illustrations by Timothy Earp

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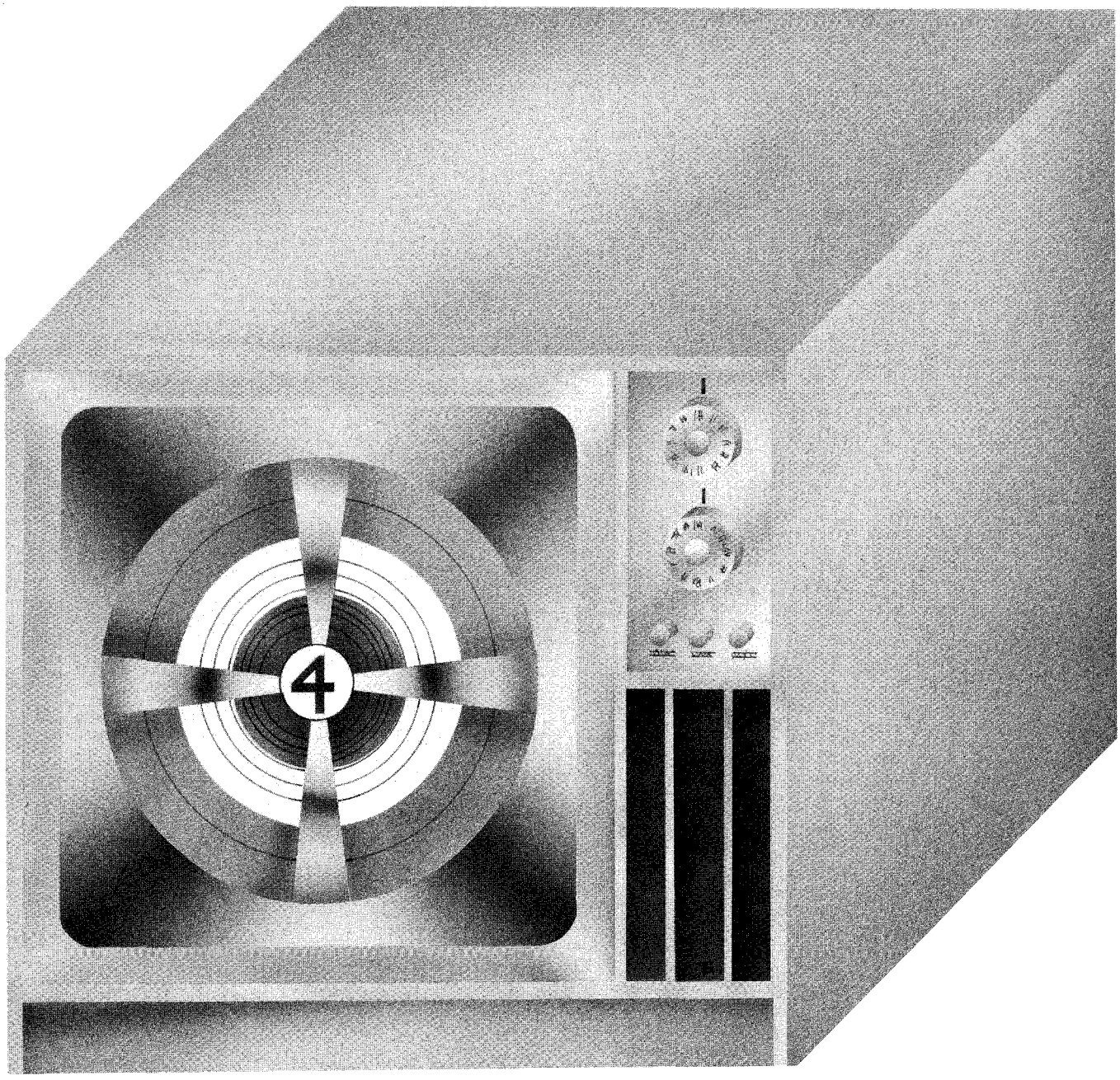

KATHLEEN SPIVACK TWO STORIES

1. LOVING

How, if you love somebody, can they be ugly to you? But there it is, it happens. Seized by a hatred so fierce it makes your legs shake, the force of it surprises you. And so unpredictably, sweeping over you at a party, in the car, or worse, directly in bed before or after love.

It's as if there were a price for coupling, or so Dacie thought as she disentangled her legs from his. And, not so subtly, rolled away. She couldn't wait to get out of bed. And she was pregnant: there was so little time.

"You're always in such a hurry," he commented. His voice was muffled but she could hear the reproach. It was she who was expected to be constant. "Trapped!" she said to herself, squatting in the bathroom. "I'm trapped!"

Yet, other times, he was the most wonderful lover, the most empathetic. She looked at him and marveled: they were twins. But all that changed when she had the baby.

When she had the baby! It cleaved her life in half; it ran through her like a river. She crossed over, onto

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another shore. She suffered, for the first time in her life, and the baby tied itself to her with little burning threads. Nothing could ever be the same.

"Ouch!" she cried, when her husband tried to touch her breasts. They were swollen, hot with milk. "They belong to the baby now," she thought, and stirred impatiently when she felt her husband's desire. It seemed she was always in tears; her stitches healed but left a hurt right up into her; how was it that only she experienced all this? Where was the empathy now?

"I'm really stuck," she thought, working the splinter in deeper, "between the baby who needs and needs, and this man." She had begun to refer to Robert internally as "this man." It expressed her alienation: "this stranger." The baby needed and needed and screamed in the night. When she came back to bed her husband put his arm on her: she moved away. "Dacie," he pleaded, but "It's too soon," she answered sternly, moving away. She didn't sleep.

Later she tried to force herself to be a wife to Robert. The baby was older; perhaps she was ready. And then the baby started to shriek in its little crib, starting in just as Dacie got herself into the mood to make love. Or, if the baby was silent while they made love, it started to scream, desperately, just as Dacie started to come. The depth of her violent fury frightened her; she wanted to kill; she made Robert go in to take care of the baby.

"Is it because he's a boy?" she asked her husband, when he came back to bed. "Is it because he's tuned in to me?" She imagined the child was frightened on her behalf.

The screaming went on for weeks: Dacie wouldn't let Robert touch her. And Robert, too, lay tense when the baby cried, relaxing only when Dacie brought it into the bed and nursed it. Robert had given up desire, was giving up wanting her. The baby sucked noisily, sweating with greed, one strand of Dacie's hair caught in his fist, and one proprietary arm on her breast.

And the three of them lay in the bed in the dark and started to breathe easily. A wave of happiness swept over Dacie, nursing her baby. "You are my lover," she whispered to his shell-ear. "You are my only lover."

But she leaned her back on her husband's, and in the winter night through her nightgown their bodies were warmed. The child was quiet now. And Dacie was swept by the warmth of nursing, more powerful than love, which was after all a conscious effort. And her husband put his hand on the baby's. "Little one," he whispered, forgivingly. "Little one." □

2. DOROTHY

Dorothy takes her two children with her everywhere, and tries to feel welcome. Her lank hair hangs in her eyes. And they have the same hair: sullen forelocks out of which they watch the world. And when Dorothy is not out with her children she is in the kitchen, in a futile attempt to pretend that life is organized. As if pot-shine were money.

She can't shake her children, for her frustrations, so she clatters the pans significantly instead. Her children are calm; they never worry about anything.

But Dorothy and the kids go to her cousins in the country, where the kids discover that some people have money and others, themselves, for instance, do not. And Dorothy does not know what to do with their knowledge, except to talk earnestly about capitalism, injustice, and the system.

Still, the kids are good kids and do not ask for much. It is only with their father that they are greedy. They come back from their visits to him with their arms full. New clothes, toys that break within a day, candy. Dorothy is in despair.

"I want!" they say to him, and, seized with guilt because he sometimes welches on Visiting Privileges, he rushes out and buys the whole city. Dorothy worries they will compare her tightwad nature with his. And aside from this spending he is a good revolutionary, and it is neither politics nor materialism that has caused them to break up. No, the weakness lay somewhere between the ego and the sheets, like the part of a leash frayed through by too much wrangling.

Dorothy knows his flaws and despises him for them, but this she does not tell the children. How can she say she is disappointed: the god that failed? But "Be realistic," is how she admonishes the children most often.

Now, though, she is an object lesson in oppression: what with welfare, never enough to eat, secondhand clothes and an apartment crawling with roaches; her children feel themselves to be aristocrats. Here they are, going out to the movies, and staying through the midnight show, all breathless. Though Dan is heavy with sleep, and his sister's head is throbbing, they will not give up, they will not succumb—never—to sleep in the airless theatre. Dorothy is as stunned as they are when the lights go on. "Is it over?"

They wander out, and the cool air of early morning rushes up to their faces. They stumble: life is delicious. Then Dorothy takes the hands of her children and the three of them cross the avenue, bravely. There is no traffic. Only a few waiting buses breathe. "Would you like some ice cream?" she asks the children, in a rare concession to cavities and bad teeth.

They enter an ice cream store, one of a chain of such, and the children blink and squint in the glare, as if entering heaven. It is late; they are unable to choose. So their mother chooses. "I'll have one too." says Dorothy. Who cares how fat she gets; she is free! And they eat their ice cream cones in silence, thoughtfully. The children in their shabby clothing huddle against her. The rest of the world is asleep.

And Dorothy feels—is—amazingly happy. Suddenly, in the glare of the ice cream parlor, she looks at her sallow children, and her eyes fill with tears. She wants to embrace them! This cheesy world she spends so much time fighting and fearing: somehow, they are managing to slip through a crack. Bits of the movie replay in her head. She, too, is so tired she is swaying. Warm, throbbing, in total silence they leave, and, as one unit, their legs keeping time, walk home. □

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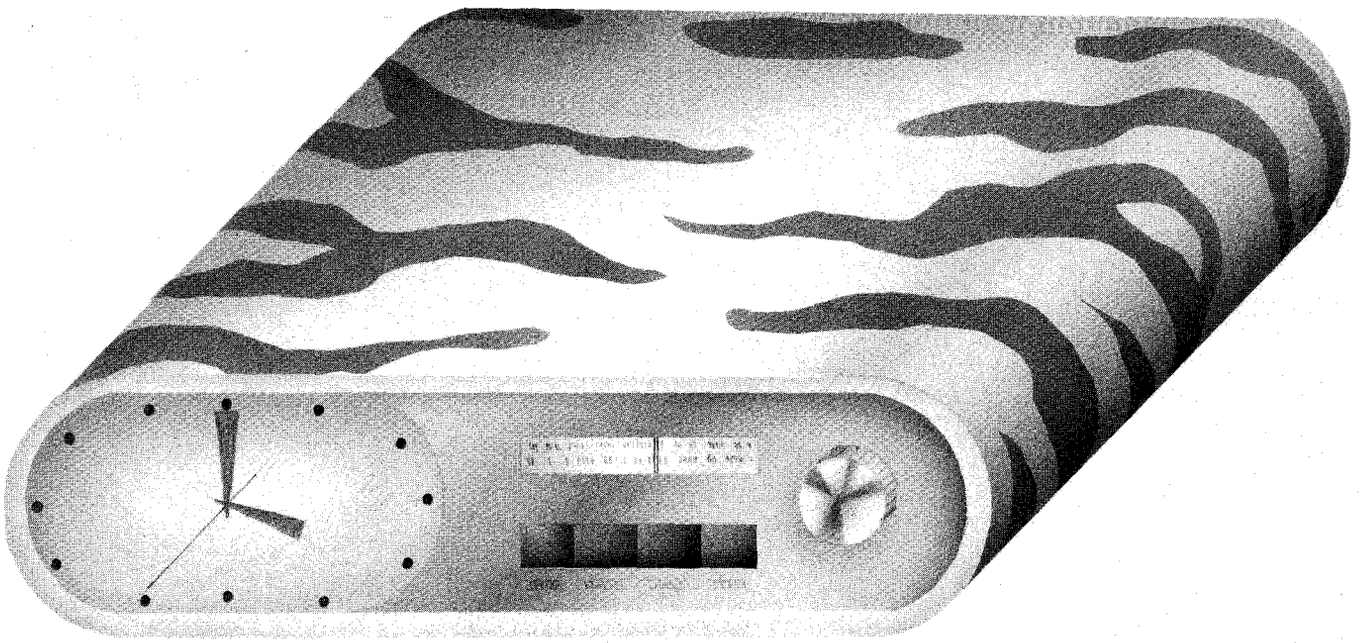

THE BEAR TAMERS

ALLEN WOODMAN

It was enough that his father taught dancing bears to massage the muscles of poor people weary from working all day in the fields of Rucar. The elder of the tribe rubbed a pinch of salt on a small loaf of bread and tore it into two pieces. The bear-tamer's son and I exchanged portions before eating them. We were married.

Our wedding-night was enlivened by Bruin, his father's favorite. First my new husband bathed me in milk. Then I lay down on the floor to enjoy the bear's somewhat heavy-footed treatment. My husband beat time with his hand-made drum. I intoned the prayer for starting a journey. My muscles tensed. They let go. Then I don't know what I did. But since then I have never been on particularly good terms with my orgasms.

When I was again among the living, my new husband smiled at me. A cigarette hung from his lips like a wolf's fang. The smoke was like the shadow of a pale angel.

About the subject of love, my grandmother said, "A man has a mouse in his trousers."

About the subject of bears, my grandmother said nothing.

I had lived with her in a place called The Street of Spoons. It was called The Street of Spoons because of the principal profession of the community. The people would collect wood in the forest and carve beautiful spoons out of it. Occasionally an eccentric would move into the area and make wooden combs.

In the autumn many of the women would work as farm laborers. The men preferred to stay closer to home. It was while returning from working on the land that I met the bear-tamer and his son.

They were toiling along the road dressed in leather coats studded with brass ornaments, dragging after them a big black bear. The men's tawny skins and faces were framed in locks of hair that fell like bluish-black snakes upon their necks.

It pleased the men to show off their bear to us. They put on heavenly smiles, showing off their white teeth.

The older man started imitating castanets by cracking the joints of his fingers. He motioned for the younger to begin banging a drum. Then the older man threw his cap in the air and started strutting about like a peacock.

The bear did not pay much attention to the men beyond giving a low grunt.

The older man began to shout excitedly at it. He kicked its legs apart.

The bear rose up on its hind legs. It danced heavily. It was the sad dance of a tired bear on a hot, dusty road. But we applauded.

The men followed us back to The Street of Spoons to camp for the night.

The houses on The Street of Spoons were made of tree trunks joined by pieces of packing cases. They were only used in the winter-time or when there was rain. Most of the time we slept outdoors on skins.

That night my grandmother served the men Tuica with manaliga. The prune liqueur added a festive touch to the dry maize porridge. With a string, Grandmother cut the bear a large slice and even added some stewed fruit.

After our meal, my husband-to-be told me how they trained the bears. "We heat an iron tray," he said. "And when it is very hot, we set the bear upon it. We play music and beat a drum. The bear feels the heat and begins to hop. After a while, the bear learns to hop just to the rhythms of the drum."

Then he told me how they caught the bears in the mountains.

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There were three things I had to do after my new husband and I lay down on the floor together.

One was to carry a lump of sugar under my armpit to ensure the sweetness of my wedding.

Second was to save the pieces of a plate my husband broke behind me.

And the third, the most important thing of all, consecrated our carnal union.

My grandmother appeared at the door with a chicken in a sack. I thanked her and told her it would not be needed.

I danced on a table wearing a blood-stained garment. It was the proof my husband's family needed. It was a slow dance. I was tired and sore. All roared with laughter. The wine had gone to their heads.

I climbed down from the table and sat in one of the chairs that surrounded the revelers. The chair legs sank down into the ground. My new husband was drinking with the men and dancing as though possessed. It was like death.

Later someone suggested that the party move on to another house. Three fiddlers led the procession. Some of them carried torches.

I stayed behind with a man and a woman who were quarreling. He told her how he had cut his first wife's nose off for committing adultery. She said that that had seemed fair, but having her banished from the community seemed too harsh.

I heard the bears in the dark scratching paws and legs in an attempt to break their leashes. Or maybe, I thought, they were just practicing their daily leapings and slidings that took them nowhere.

I decided to make the bears more manaliga and stewed fruit, to learn all of their silent names.

About the subject of love, my grandmother said, "A woman marries her lips together." □

NOEL

MICHAEL PLEMMONS

Mrs. Hathaway brought the children downstairs single file and seated them on straight-back chairs around the reception room, boy-girl-boy-girl, seventeen in all. In the corner stood a robust Christmas tree bedecked with candy canes and tinsel tresses. The air was thick with the scent of pine and furniture polish as a phantom choir sang "Noel" to the strains of a vinyl disc orchestra. Mrs. Hathaway was still fussing over their appearance, fixing the boys' neckties and correcting the girls' posture, when the first couple arrived. In hushed tones they spoke with Mrs. Overton at the front desk. "We were thinking about a girl," said the woman. Mrs. Overton smiled broadly and made a sweeping motion with her hand. "We have a wonderful selection of girls," she said. At this the girls came to attention in their places, each freckle blooming on rosy cheeks. And as Mrs. Hathaway presented them, each one stood and curtsied on cue. "Christa is a lovely child, age eight . . . Melinda has a beautiful singing voice for carols . . . Stephanie has an exceptionally sweet temperament. . . ."

The clients turned to Mrs. Overton and quietly indicated their choice. She nodded, poker-faced, and prepared the papers. Money changed hands. The girls eyed each other nervously as Mrs. Overton recited the rental stipulations: "You understand that this is only a 48-hour agreement. The girl must be returned by noon on the day after Christmas or late charges will be assessed at ten dollars per hour and you will forfeit the insurance deposit." When everything was in order she looked over at Mrs. Hathaway and said, "Melinda, please." A little squeak of joy escaped into the room as Melinda jumped up and rushed to join her hosts for the holiday. The other girls watched her go, their hope renewing as another pair of patrons entered the room from the foyer.

Throughout the afternoon they came two by two, childless on Christmas Eve. They were high-rise dwellers and they were pensioners from South Side bungalows. A few were first-timers, uneasy, unable to meet the children's eyes. (The repeat customers, who each year made up a majority of the business, had reserved their "Kristmas Kid" by name, weeks in advance, and had come by in the morning for express pick-up.) Most of those now arriving to browse among the leftovers were last minute shoppers.

The girls were in great demand, especially the youngest candidates in curls. Dimples and bangs, once again, were very popular. And for the boys, missing teeth and cowlicks were favorite features. Considering the irregular inventory, business was good. Of the original lot, only two rather plain-looking lads remained at six o'clock, closing time. Both bore the stigma of a pubescent mustache.

Mrs. Overton finished her filing while Mrs. Hathaway affixed the "Closed" sign on the door, unplugged the Christmas lights, and drew the window shades all around. The boys sat silent, watchful.

Said Mrs. Overton, "I told you about those two preteens, didn't I?"

"Yes, ma'am, you did."

"Then why did you bring them down with the others?"

"Well, I was hoping, I guess." Mrs. Hathaway glanced at her rejected charges. They gazed guiltily into their laps. "It did no harm to give them at least a chance."

Mrs. Overton regarded her for a moment, then answered calmly, "I suppose not." She was pleased with the day's proceeds, too pleased to argue over a minor transgression. Anyway, she did not want to discourage a certain degree of compassion, believing it was one of the qualities that made Mrs. Hathaway an effective matron.

Outside it was beginning to snow. Before leaving, Mrs. Overton wrapped herself in a muffler and donned a woolen cap. "I'll see you day after tomorrow then."

"Goodnight, ma'am," said Mrs. Hathaway, then turning to the boys, "Come along."

As they slowly ascended the stairs, one of the boys emitted a peculiar nasal sound, a congested sentiment perhaps.

"Quiet, child," said Mrs. Hathaway. □

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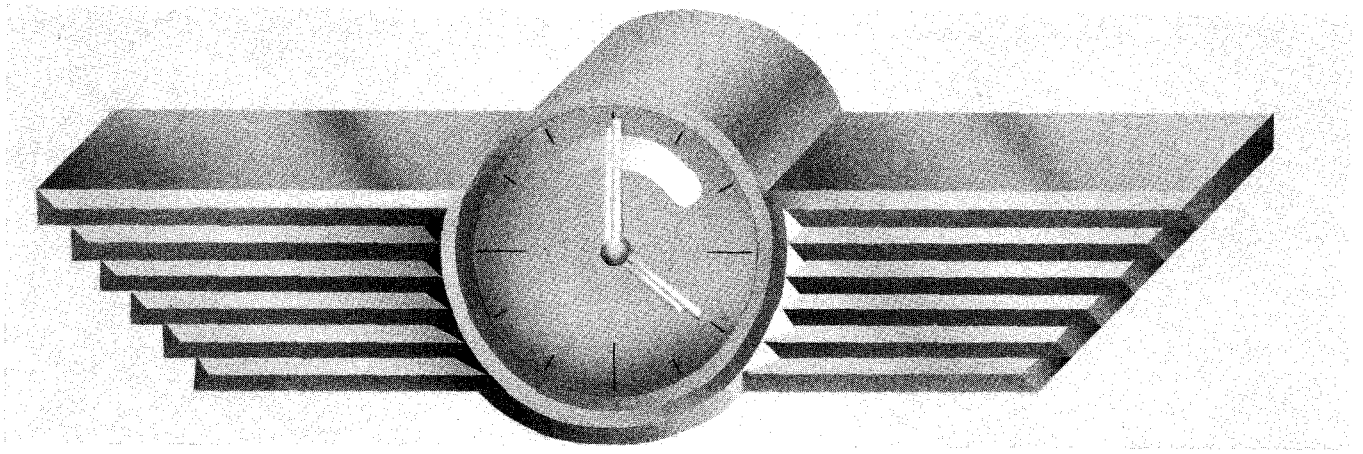

HE THE FISHER

CATHERINE PETROSKI

Mettressa sit above me counting while I fish. She spread her hand wide like a sweet pink map of anywhere, and in it she hold all the money she got in this world, for the time being. I hear her few money clicking now close, one two three, and Mettressa hum a little as she count. We sit on this bank out here nowhere, Mettressa parked up on the Durham Chapel Hill four lane, and we fixed to catch a supper.

Perse, it that simple, Mettressa say to me. We eat us a dinner tonight, it be because you catch us a fish, she say. Thing is, I know this place most as well as Mettressa or her hand, and what I know the fish in this hole wise to hooks and worms and what people fish in the dead of a summer afternoon. They know about supper too. They not going to get themselves caught like any old dumb river fish dont know no better. Fish in this hole know about the world.

Now Jasarow chase them, butterfly and double dragon, up and down this grass bank till I think it time he catch one, or quit or fall in, one. Mettressa stop her figuring and her thinking. She call to Jasarow, Jasarow come here boy and sit yourself down here by your mama, you scaring dinner off.

Then Jasarow do as he told, since all the world know Mettressa just as soon knock him down as love him to death. Little Jasarow, no bigger than a morning, sit and search big-eyed through the weed (chokeberry, nettle-leaf), looking for some kind of bug to play with. And if he lucky, some big old green grasshopper come up and spit on Jasarow, and Jasarow say, Woh, mister grasshop, what you did, and he take the grasshopper by his long back legs and tame him, speak to him in bug talk, and Mettressa go back to humming and counting her few money, happy he quiet now.

Come on Perse, she say to me, you got no fish yet girl? And I just duck my head and she know the answer. She know the answer anyhow, she just checking. I got enough here to buy some fatback, but nothing more, she say, and cant have fatback till tomorrow cause the beans aint soaked, and if we eat tonight, its cause you get a little luckier than you been.

I look into that old pond water and feel my stomach squeezing in on itself. I feel my sides clean skinny and look at Jasarow and wonder if he *eat* bug too sometime. And I try to see through that murk in the water to ask whoever run this hole, please, just a small one so we have us a supper. The water all brown and not so good to see into. All I see is bubbles coming up. Some old mud turtle, and I sure hope he dont take the bait. And ever once in a while a nice ring inside itself again again that spread all across the pond where some old fish ate a bug off the watertop. I wonder and pretend. What it like to be a fish, I think. What the fish see, I wonder. Me and Mettressa and Jasarow, big, with little heads way up high at the top, angels of the lord. Or maybe just the Carolina sky behind us forever and to the edge.

Now Jasarow gone and lost his grasshopper, silly boy. He whimper a little and Mettressa say just you hush there, Jasarow. So now he go after bugs on the wing. I tell Mettressa that boy cut out for his lifework, and he be perfect when he grow up to work for Mr. Filebey, the exterminator. When I say that Mettressa laugh and say it way too early for Jasarow to think on lifework, but I best be thinking after a man. I think it way too early for me to think after a man, but Mettressa say yes and smile her golden smile with eyes a wrinkle and hum and look away. Fact is Mettressa wont have one around no more, not since Sam Persons up and left, but if she really want me to think on a man, maybe she mean a different kind than my daddy. No place for some kind of man.

Come long Jasarow, Mettressa say. This sun too hot for your poor old mama. We go sit in the car while Perse catch us some supper. Mettressa ought to have sense enough to know you dont catch fish in the dead afternoon like this, July. Maybe Mettressa lost what brain she have, crying after Sam Persons like that, poor sad thing, and looking high and low through Durham and Orange county both, making a spectacle of herself asking everbody else to look out for Sam Persons too. Where that man go nobody know, or nobody tell. Mettressa stop crying after a while and pretty soon she hold a funeral for Sam Persons

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my daddy, just a Wednesday evening prayer service, a vase of flowers, a fifteen-minute sermon and three hymns, and Sam Persons, like that, dead. Mettressa take off the wedding ring and burn it in the stove. She say it werent gold or real either one anyway and now that book is closed for good, she say. Sam Persons my daddy, Jasarows too.

That three years now, and Mettressa go over to Chapel Hill to work in the laundry and come home at night and tell me all how fine them clothes, how bad she want to bring home this or that for me to wear just some night and take back in the morning first thing. She talk for hours, after Jasarow go to bed and I more than ready for sleep myself. But Mettressa every day have to tell me bout the prettiest dress of each, and all how fine it look on me, only pretend, never real. Mettressa never bring home anything except too little money. What can I do, she say, but the best I can. All them pretty college girls, Mettressa say, how they do strut, how they do laugh. All them pretty college girls, so smart, so fine. And then Mettressa rub her eyes and say, That todays outfit, Perse, now you get on to bed, you stay up too late, baby, and so then I hold my eyes shut tight and pretend my gown that red silk dress Mettressa do at ten this morning.

Soon I see, sure enough, I not alone at all. Mettressa done took Jasarow up by the Durham four lane to keep him quiet and from scaring off dinner. They sitting in the car with the doors away from the road standing open like flood gates and sweet the music coming from Sam Persons left behind box nice and easy, blues. I pull up my line to see if the bait still there, it been a long time and nothing happening. When I see the empty hook I hear a soft laugh over out of the willow thicket growing in that brake there. Who there, I say, not expecting a civilized answer. Dont get one either, in words, that is, but just a hum in tune with Mettressas music, except high and fancy like a real singer.

I look back up at Mettressa. She look, but then she look the other way, over cross the four lane. Jasarow let out one of his yells and I hear Mettressa tell him hush up. This here my problem I think, Mettressa done washed her hands. I get me a worm out of my plastic container from the Winn Dixie deli from cold slaw once and thread him on the hook, curly at the first then straight on the hook to cover it up, with just a little loose end a wiggle to make the fish look. I'm not looking over to that willow thicket, if it hum all day. If somebody so simple he sit there in hot July with nothing better on his mind than a hum, not fish or do anything, that not my problem, but his. Sing on, you willow fool, I think, and go back to fishing and a thinking on my fish thoughts, my fish mind.

Right then dinner strike, and answer all my prayers but one. When I feel that hard tug on the line, I think trouble: that fish a whale or a big old mud turtle, one. Like to pull the pole clean out of my hand, but I hold on for dear life and the red and white ball float sink out of sight in the brown water. My cane pole bend till I think it soon must break, but somehow it stronger than I think or know. Stronger than anybody guess.

Hey, hey, that willow say but I too busy to look up and see that man cross through the brake, through cattail and duckweed. He already there, on me, before I know, and when I see him, he look to smile a maybe.

A smile if I do. I do.

What you got there, he ask and I dont know, I say, maybe he can tell me.

You finally catch the catking, he tell me. Me, my daddy been fishing this hole ten year and ever time we get the catking on the line he break it and get away.

I say is that so.

He say that so, and you be careful now or he get away from you too, Perse.

How you know my name I say, and he say he just guess. I say what if I tell you you guess wrong, and he just laugh. I say you guess wrong, now leave me to getting my dinner. I aint about to guess after Willows name.

He say you not catching dinner here. I say sure enough am, and you bothering me man.

Dont mean to do that Perse he say, and he start back cross through the cattail, and just then the line break and that old red and white float come flying out of the water like a bullet. Now see what you done I say, and he look sad, though some people would have said the catking did it.

Here I thought somebody finally catch that old catking, he say. I seen him on the hook, gray and slick as a road in the rain, them old whiskers hanging down, them flat eyes looking round. Did you see him, Perse, he ask, and I just hold my tongue. Want me to string you another hook on there, he say, turning to come back. I can string my own hook, manythanks, I been doing it since I been this high.

Mettressa keep the hooks and leaders and leadweights in her tacklebox in the cartrunk, never go anyplace at all without her tacklebox. She going to be fit to be tied when she see I lost one more hook and leader. I look up to the car sitting by that highway. The four lane five o'clock traffic starting crowded now and still got me no dinner, no dinner for Mettressa or Jasarow either. Them cars rushing by, the same ever day of the world hurry morning hurry night, and then next day the same and again. On and on, like Jasarow playing with his bugs and Mettressa saying Sam Persons dead and she well shut of him, but in her heart sore and sorry as she can be.

Mettressa look down to that old fish hole, her grey eyes light in her dark face, and I see a smile. Then before I can get to the car she turn and put Jasarow in, close up the doors, start up the engine and drive off toward Hayti. Mama mama I think, what you doing, but I dont call out.

Willow looking and listening.

She be back, Willow say, I got a hook if you want to share.

He go get the square paper pack of hooks and pull out the last.

He take my line and thread on lead to keep it down and make a loop that mate with his, and then he pull, the two are tight. He thread the worm and toss the line. Then I know, I the catking and the bait both, and this sweet singing man who wait for me to smile first and give me his last hook, he the fisher. □

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BEYOND THEIR REACH

DEBORAH STEWART

I am so afraid it's going to come crashing down around me. One morning the bank will call to say my money is not enough. My mother will call to say my father has died and my brother will stop by for tea and explain once again how I ruined his life with my grades and good manners. My father-in-law will invite me to Sunday dinner so he can quiz my husband about the last investment of thousands that did not pan out despite the desperate efforts of my husband, and my sister-in-law will telephone to say she has bought grandmother an $84 suit for her birthday and would I help pay for it?

Then the washing machine will break in mid-cycle and the electric garage door will spring a chain. The dog will throw up on the living room rug and I will notice for the first time how suddenly threadbare the living room couch is. My son will grouse about breakfast before I give in to his request for a Pudding Pop at seven in the morning.

Next, I will call the public school system to inquire about observing and the secretary will behave as if I have insulted her. When I arrive, the woman who points me in the right direction will look at me through half-closed eyes, suspicious of God knows what. Then I will be touched by the janitor who escorts me to room 150 where the children sit quietly in rows watching in the dark a television film about light, refractory and reflective light. I will gaze at their faces in the still light of the shaded room and wonder about their sweetness, their innocence.

The child nearest me will have crutches leaning against his legs. I will become aware of his gaze on me. With my eyes I will trace his child's hands, the dirty fingernails, the small scratches. When I touch his shoulders in my mind I will see they are firm and developed beyond his age from bearing so much weight so soon. As he prepares to leave the room to return to the handicapped class next door I will want to reach a hand to touch his head. He will wait until the others have gone. Clearing a space for himself, he will position his metal crutches and hoist his weight. He will walk, side-saddle, from the room.

The halls outside the classroom will remind me of my days in elementary school and a panic will swell up but I will fight it back down. I'm weary of such desperation but I know it's there. I can't change that. I will remember so vividly Harvey Diamond's mother coming to our sixth grade class and standing near him in the hall. We were lined up against one wall, leaning against the mass of concrete block painted pale yellow. Harvey's mother was dying. She had cancer. I don't remember why she came that day. I just remember the look on her face as she gazed at Harvey. She reached out and touched his hair. His hair was deep black, glowing black like hers.

I will leave the building knowing I can't send my children there. It's too much my past, too much what I struggle daily against. I can't allow them the same deadening.

My doctor will say of my well-educated sister-in-law, "She went to the best schools. Does she show any signs of education?"

He knows I can't abide my sister-in-law. She is selfish beyond belief. She is mean too. I stopped by her house to pick up clothes for charity. She offered me a small bag and looked in my back seat.

"Looks like you have a load. That's a nice coat." She eyed the coat I had set aside for the mother of the family our Sunday School class was helping.

Grandmother, who will be 89, will call to check on my wallpapering and painting. I am not wallpapering or painting but she will have it in her mind that this is how I spend my time.

I am frightened of creditors. Before brushing my teeth in the morning I will look in the mirror and say, "They can't get me if I am dead. I can always die if it gets too bad. I can always put myself beyond their reach."

Then my doctor will look at me.

"Why should it matter?" I will ask him.

"Why shouldn't it?" he will shrug.

"Because there's nothing I can do about it."

"Are you sure?" he will ask.

"What do you think?" I will reply.

"I think you don't want to deal with it," he will say.

"Can't you understand I get tired sometimes?"

"This has nothing to do with fatigue," he will reply.

"How can you say that?" I will feel my voice catch.

"Because it's true," he will say.

"Well, what do you suggest I do?"

"I suggest you deal with it," he will respond.

"How?" I will fit the word around my whole body.

"What do you think?" he will ask me.

"You want me to stop trying to control the situation."

He will sit silently.

"You want me to relax and stop beating myself over the head with it," I will whisper.

He will be like a stone.

"You want me to consider my own pain for a change, deal with how I've been punished." I will sink back against the chair.

He will remain silent.

"You want me to show myself some love." I will close my eyes to stop the tears.

"I want," he will say softly. "I want you to deal with it." □

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FLAMING DOORWAY

Mark Halliday

Dear James Cody,

You are about to read a strange letter, but as an editor you have probably done that before. It is coming from a person who is not generally weird, if I do say so myself, but she is in a weird state of mind—and trying to reach out of it, reach *to* someone outside.

—Now you're probably thinking, Help! What is this? Do you remember a tall woman with long brown hair, glasses, navyblue sweater and gray corduroys, nervous smile, trace of a Southern accent for those who can hear it—at Mike Mazur's opening at M.I.T. last winter, mid February. I was standing with Mike's father-in-law and that blond painter who never smiles, I don't remember why I was with them, but you and Sergio Denaro came over to look at the long triptych—the giant sunflowers in the wet-looking moonlight. Sergio knows me slightly from when I lived with his brother (3 months, 1977). We got to talking. You handed me some white wine in one of those tiny plastic cups. They only hold about three ounces, how were we ever supposed to feel loose? It was only about ten minutes altogether but in fact ten minutes is a long time to be talking directly to a stranger—Sergio went off to talk to Mike and I guess so did the other two men. Ten minutes—and—I felt we had a rapport. Did you feel it?

I think you *must* remember our conversation anyway. Right away I asked what you do, and told you I read NER occasionally. "That's more than anybody else here," you said—sounding very cynical. You didn't really believe I read the magazine and I could tell. That dry look in your eyes. Do you say your eyes are gray? That's how I remember them and I'm usually right on details like that. It's the big things I screw up. So, I tried to prove I read NER and I named a story, by Charla Somebody, the one about the crazy mother hiding her daughter from all men. I had the title wrong but I said something good about the story—"the paradox of love", something—and you liked it. I mean I know you liked it and weren't just polite, because I watched your eyes. Then, your cup of wine turned out to be leaking, we laughed and poured your wine into my cup after I drank mine fast. You said "You're liable to lose control if you keep up that pace." I laughed and touched your wrist—

Mr. James Cody, what will you think of this? Three months have passed. I've thought of you often. I saw you at the Orson Welles twice, "Mephisto" and "The Year of Living Dangerously." I was alone both times, you were with your wife. I too am married, been married for two years. What can I say—I hesitate. Can we have lunch sometime?

Sincerely,
Jean Corkum

Dear James Cody,

I can't believe I sent you that letter. You must have thought—what did you think? You got it yesterday or maybe Tuesday. When I wrote it, at least when I started writing it I didn't believe I could really send it and then when I finished it something happened, I felt intoxicated or something—by the magic of my own prose, ha ha—and I suddenly took it to a mailbox and mailed it and ran home, I literally ran home as if the mailbox was pursuing me to make me take back the letter. Now imagine how embarrassed I am. I don't know you *at all* and here I am baffling a busy man with incredibly vague letters—

well, I have no excuse. Please don't feel you even need to reply—or, you could just send me an NER brochure or catalogue of what the Press is putting out this year, with just HELLO written beside your name on the masthead. You know? Ships that honk in the night.

Apologetically,
Jean Corkum

Dear Jean Corkum:

I read both your letters today—I'm always a couple of days behind with my correspondence, but the green envelopes caught my eye. Yes, I do remember you from the Mazur opening and how much I enjoyed talking to you. Also, I'm sure I did notice you one evening at the Orson Welles. In general my memory for acquaintances is very poor, but I'm not apt to forget such a strikingly attractive woman.

There are aspects of your letters which I don't understand, I'm afraid. You don't mention any writing of your own, so I take it you are not intending to offer manuscripts to NER. Is there any other way in which I can be of service to you? I am not, after all, the busiest man in the world.

Sincerely,
James Cody

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Dear James Cody,

I just got your lovely note and I'm feeling so excited! Isn't that ridiculous? Why is this? Something about your note being so calm and well-mannered, on that cream-colored paper, I love it! It's just the note I would have imagined you writing. The way it is both personal and controlled: that's something I think I'll never be. Personally, I am nothing but personal! Both on paper and in person!

God, I'm glad you don't have a secretary who opens your insane mail. You don't, do you? If you do, I will personally kill her. (Beware, Miss Pennybottom!)

Did you honestly think I was "strikingly attractive?" Or are you merely being gallant?

No, I'm not a writer. I'm a painter. Or was till three months ago. For some reason in February I stopped in the middle of a painting of Copley Plaza, with Trinity Church reflected on the side of the Hancock Building, and there are these two black women in red dresses in the foreground—it was good—it was going well—but I stopped. It was weird—I felt like I had to stop because it was going so well: I could see it was going to be a terrific beautiful painting, and I couldn't bear it! I'm serious when I judge my work, Mr. Cody, I mean I very seldom have thought it was good, but this composition was really on the way—beauty—joy—and one rainy morning I looked at it and thought, "That's too good to be true." Or something. It expressed a joy that wasn't in my heart. So strange: it *had* to be a real joy or I wouldn't have been getting it on canvas (I believe that) yet it was not the truth about me, it was maybe the truth about another me who was walking on some other street or waiting to wake up in some lovely tacky hotel room with glass elevators and giant indoor plants. So, that day I wrapped my blue bedspread around the canvas and I haven't touched it since or done *any* work except doodling since February. And it has been a peculiar time for me.

But what does it all have to do with you, you wonder. I don't know: I had this memory of your face and your voice and felt it would be nice to talk to you. But—please, Mr. Cody—I am *not* asking for any kind of charity. You have to understand that. I am a functioning person, with a Daycare job 15 hours a week and another job (secretarial sort of) 10 hours and—what else—a husband who takes me out to symphonies and to Ferdinand's once a week. What more could I ask, ha ha.

Sometimes I feel like Diane Keaton must have studied me when she did Annie Hall—not to mention another one of her movies.

Today on Boylston Street I saw a teenage girl who was walking along singing, singing loudly, she didn't worry at all about what people thought—"What's so funny about peace love and understanding" she was singing; she wore purple lipstick and I suppose she is an authentic punk rocker—beautiful! She was beautiful to me, because she was letting herself OUT. In years gone by I did that, wildly, and got hurt, but it was *life*. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Jean Corkum

Dear Jean Corkum,

I was glad to receive your intriguing letter; but I continue to be rather baffled as to your needs and interests. You know, of course, that I am not a psychologist (though you are perhaps aware that I have published essays on Jung and Wilhelm Reich) and thus if you are, as I infer, depressed about your work or about other aspects of your life, you should seek advice or counseling not from me but from someone with the proper training. However, I don't mean to send you away; actually, I would like to know more about you. Your serious attitude toward art is appealing and impressive. Will you describe your career to me, and perhaps go into more detail as to your present situation?

For the next couple of weeks I will be deluged with work, as we complete our Special Issue on Fiction of the Workplace. But then in June I will be more free, and we might get together for lunch.

Sincerely,
James Cody

Dear James Cody,

Do people call you Jim? I think you introduced yourself as Jim that night at the opening. Really only British men go around being called James, true?

Depressed? Yes! That is one word for it, I suppose, but such a vague or shadowy word, just a gray blotch. I would say more that I am *questioning*—at a radical level—and looking for some new kind of outlet for energy—spiritual, physical, everything. Don't worry, I didn't dream of using you as a shrink. I just thought we *might* become friends, I suppose.

Is this green paper garish, do you think? I adored it when I bought it. But I was different then. Robert (my husband) says it is schoolgirlish. (As if that were so bad!)

I'm eating a pink grapefruit from Florida.

In an hour I have to go to the Daycare Center on Brookline Avenue where a two-year-old named Diane nearly bit my finger off yesterday. I don't want to go. I'd rather jump off a high alabaster cliff into an emerald lagoon, stark naked, and rise up feeling like human champagne.

Really, I'm good with the kids. They just don't provide me with Total Fulfillment. Do you have kids? I seem to know that you do—one, a boy?

My career? How funny that word sounds when I look back over my years. The years since I got out of Berkeley (B.A. 1970) feel like they have been one long weird weekend. I worked as a waitress for, altogether, three years—isn't that incredible? I can't believe how many club sandwiches I have gently deposited in front of hungry enterprising optimistic Americans. Then I went to RISD for two years and quit in a fling with CREATIVE DESPAIR. I told my friends I would kill myself because I couldn't be Degas because Degas already *was* Degas. Had them scared for a while. My career. My career has consisted mainly of museums and reading long novels and walking in the rain (I'm a romantic, if you hadn't noticed) and getting laid by men who *seemed* to be brilliant. I have

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painted maybe five good paintings—or eight, if you count some interesting self-portraits. Not much for someone thirty-five years old.

You said you remembered me as attractive—and I think it's true—I *know* I have a *great* figure. My face, though, has something girlish about it. Robert says I constantly look like the victim of a practical joke. I married Robert two years ago. He is a violinist—the classic Struggling Musician—except his father gives us money. Robert is a brooding person. Some days I know we love each other, but then some days the lack of communication is *amazing*.

I have to go.

Hope I haven't scared you away!

Yours,
Jean C.

Dear Jean,

Thank you for your lively letter. You don't consider yourself a writer, but in fact your letters are remarkable for their vividness and energy, qualities which many of the writers I publish could use more of. Your prose has a youthful freshness like your stationery and I can't see why your husband should cast aspersions on it.

The problem of retaining our youthfulness is a theme in your letters, I think, and it is a problem we share as people drifting slowly (or not so slowly) toward that hazy region of regret called "middle age." Though I am a little younger than you I feel somehow several years older, since my life is (from what you've indicated) more settled than yours in several ways. I do indeed have one son (did I mention him the night we met?), Daniel, ten years old. Nancy and I have been married for ten years. Obviously I made some big decisions at an early age and ruled out various possibilities, as I suppose we all must do. I think people who become parents as early as I did eventually sense that they never quite lived out their youths. I'm sure my wife feels this too, though we conspire to refer to this idea only jokingly. No doubt none of us ever finds "Total Fulfillment" as you call it; but it would be nice to think that our capacity for experimentation has not completely withered away. I'm reminded of your description of the punk rocker with purple lipstick.

Perhaps you are now planning to raise children; is that one reason for your marriage two years ago? I'm curious to know more about your present life and plans.

Meanwhile, my own present life requires that I attend my son's baseball game—baseball is everything to him; he tells me he is modeling his swing on that of Rod Carew (the passion of youthfulness)—and then I must buy a book on modern Greece for my wife's birthday. In mid-June she is going to Greece for a month with a friend of hers.

Sincerely,
Jim Cody

Dear Jim,

Youthfulness! Who knows?

My present life and plans? If I don't paint something serious soon, my plan is to go insane and fly to New Orleans and become a go-go dancer. But till then, time lies heavy on my bitten hands. You wouldn't believe how fake-busy a person can be who has two little part-time jobs. It's only 25 hours a week which I *know* is incredibly less than most people work, but there is all the driving back and forth. I have my own car, an ancient Rabbit which I adore because it loves me—it *must* love me because it never gets very sick. I just buy new tires occasionally, and kiss the hood, and off we go. So actually I seem to be driving around a lot, more than I need to. I used to say that driving for pleasure was evil (the pollution) but I've changed my tune. "Man I was mean but I'm changing my scene." I see myself driving a little too fast in traffic, one hand on the wheel and one hand playing with my hair—singing with the radio—"Who can it be now?" I *love* that song. Hot days are coming, you can feel it, radiating off the banks and the whiskey billboards (J&B: "It whispers.") and the high school boys heading without shirts for the basketball courts in the parks—the heat is coming.

Robert is not happy with me. He says he is, but he says it as if he is swallowing cough syrup, or sawdust. No, as if he were my stepfather and he *had* to be happy with me. I think the weather is a factor, I mean I really think the warmer it gets outside the more Robert turns quiet and cold, like trying to counterbalance the temperature, because he feels that summer wants to take him away from his music. He is a violinist as I guess you know? But how would you know, do you follow classical music? Robert is in the Morell Quartet and they're doing well—Critical Acclaim etc. "The best string quartet among the younger generation of musicians" according to Lloyd Schwartz in the *Phoenix*. They go on tour soon, Rochester, Binghamton, Elmira, other places, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Budapest (kidding), and Robert is very grim—proud and grim. He says it will be exhausting and he'll need pills to sleep and pills to wake up . . . I feel (as you can tell?) like an outsider to his music. In a way I married him because I knew he loved it. Sometimes I really feel proud of him. But it's foreign to me in some way—seems so *unlike* my kind of art. Robert *is* an artist, he composes. But his approach is to me amazingly mathematical—I mean it has this scientific, Solving This Puzzle quality.

Is it absurd for me to be telling you all this when I hardly know you?

Let's have a beer?

Your wife is lucky. I'd love to go to Greece.

Yours,
Jean

Dear Jean,

Another delightful letter from you. I'm afraid I can't try to match it today, so much work for the magazine. But yes, let's have a drink, if not lunch. Friday afternoons are good for me, maybe this Friday the 10th? Do you know Gatsby's on Boylston, next to the Common? I could meet you there anytime between three and six; let me know. (I'd rather you didn't phone me here, by the way; I have colleagues who are omnipresent and inquisitive.)

Sincerely,
Jim Cody

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Dear Jim,

Splendiferous! Or, as we used to say in Virginia when I was a kid, "That just couldn't be nicer." I'll be at Gatsby's at 5 o'clock. I'll be wearing a purple skirt (instead of lipstick!) just in case you don't recognize me (I got a permanent last week, on impulse, and my hair has A Life Of Its Own, it's electrified).

What will we talk about? Fear of middle age? Literature? I wish I knew what book to read to impress you.

See you there!

Jean

Dear Jim,

What happened? Did I screw up somehow? I was there, Gatsby's, right at five according to my watch. I waited for half an hour, feeling the raindrops drying in my hair, distorting my New Look, nursing a glass of wine. Wine made us laugh once, my darling, ha ha. Then I got self-conscious, there were some singles-type men at the bar, so I left. Pouring rain, and me with just a plastic poncho over my shirt, no umbrella—I liked getting soaked, I walked across the Common, sat on a bench by the swanboat pond for a while. Got depressed. I thought about me writing letters to you and how you must think I'm a woman with Psychological Problems. It's true. But I've got something in me that keeps living.

I'm basically a hoper. Today by that pond watching the rain jab the surface with a thousand needles I felt DESPAIR but at the same time I knew that wasn't basically *me*. The real me is of the party of hope. I feel there is the party of hope and the party of doubt. Everybody chooses. Neither choice makes more sense than the other but hope is beautiful. Robert is a doubter. That's what makes him function. It's a choice—but I choose to hope. I have slept with at least 30 men—or it could be almost 40, some of my memories are confused. Are you shocked? I'm proud of the fact—not because I worship "experience" as some people do but because I know what got me into all those beds was hope.

Tell me if you understand any of this.

Jean

Dear Jean,

I was unable to meet you at Gatsby's yesterday. I'm very sorry: I'm sure it was a nuisance for you and you must be angry with me. Because of the rainstorm, Nancy cancelled her tennis date and suddenly she insisted that we take Daniel to the Museum and then to a restaurant he likes. It's a trip we plan almost every other week and don't make, that sort of thing, but this time Nancy was determined we would do it, and I couldn't talk my way out of it.

Nancy and I have developed a relationship which is a complicated fabric of compromises. I think this has to be true of any relationship sustained for a decade, but in our case the diplomatic entente seems downright Byzantine. Very seldom does either person make a clear-cut demand, but the air is always filled with gambits and hints and warnings and proposed deals, with amendments attached to the deals and riders barnacling the amendments. I suppose this is my roundabout way of trying to explain why I had to go to the Museum yesterday; it was a concession I owed, because of certain concessions I've won lately (the cancelling of Daniel's clarinet lessons, since I'm sure he has neither talent nor interest; a dinner party for certain literary friends of mine whom Nancy dislikes . . .). But our marriage is not a battlefield; I'm describing something more subtle than warfare and not very painful. I am, in a serious sense, a happily married man.

Yet I must confess that somehow your letters have touched a certain spot in my soul (if I may speak so unscientifically) where the issue is not happiness but aliveness, animation; you have gotten me to wondering about my essential vitality; last night I picked up *The Rainbow* and read a hundred pages as if in a trance, and had the odd feeling that *you* were Ursula Brangwen, I was reading about you.

Well, I must stop this vague rumination. Please forgive me for standing you up, and consider meeting me *next* Friday. My schedule will be much easier soon. Nancy leaves for Athens on Thursday.

Sincerely,
Jim

Dear Jim,

What a relief! I felt sure I was to blame *somehow* for the missed connection. Do I have a guilt complex? No—but at times I feel my heart sort of fluttering—like a trapped dove, in my chest, and then I can't trust my own memory, and I felt that way Friday.

So now another Friday is looming. Same time, same place?

I haven't read *The Rainbow* but I love *Women in Love*. I've read it three times.

It's too hot today.

Dashing—or tumbling—off to work—invoices for stereo components—Unfulfillment!

Jean

P.S. We could form a club and invite John Coltrane and Joan Crawford and Jesus Christ to join. Get it?

Dear Jean,

Yes, let's meet at Gatsby's at five on Friday: this time you can count on me! I'm counting on the mailman to get this to you Friday morning.

Has your husband gone on tour yet?

Jean, I am startled by the excitement with which I anticipate meeting you again. Some irrational symbolism has taken root in my mind and grows with each letter I receive from you. Now I seem to recall you vividly at the Mazur opening, with your hair "frizzed" and wearing a purple skirt—but of course that's a fictional image based on correspondence, not visual memory. On Sunday I glimpsed a woman driving on Mt. Auburn Street outside Star Market and suddenly convinced myself it was you; and I felt so strange, a sort of joyous panic. Daniel noticed something in my manner and told me I was "acting weird." I'm convinced that your Rabbit is yellow. Am I right?

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Jean, I am a person with a lot of what Wilhelm Reich called character-armor. I walk around weighted with my psychological defense system; in social activity my mind is like the Strategic Air Command. What can *they* do vs. what can *I* do . . . Mostly this has been something I've accepted in myself, and, to be truthful, I'm proud of the results at times. Yet there is also a weariness, and a shame. I'm not being clear, I know. When I was in college, Jean, I used to wear a clean white shirt and a tie to classes. This was at a time when only the squarest, most rigidly conventional guys would dress like that for classes; in 1968, most of the interesting people were "freaks." I knew this and it made me enjoy dressing formally, my starched look: in a way I was daring people to make wrong guesses about me, luring them into mistakes. It was as close as I ever got to being in theater (something I've always wistfully admired). I played the role of the Class President type of circa 1962, while exulting in the knowledge that my heart was a jungle of angers and fantasies and unreasonable ambitions.

What is my point? Well, I have this feeling that my armor (I can explain the concept when I see you) has become too heavy, too layered, so much so that it's shutting me off from life—as if my skin can't breathe; and I have this irrepressible notion that *you* are going to teach me how to shed some of this armor.

You can see how eager I am to meet you Friday; I hope you'll wear the purple skirt! Can we have dinner, perhaps? Daniel is spending Friday night at Cheeko's house. Cheeko (his real name is Jason Cheek) is a boy who chews bubblegum with enormous gusto and authority. Shall we let him into our club? And why not invite John Cheever and Joseph Conrad, too?

Till Friday,
Jim

Dear Jim,

It's so hot today. Seems like August. We have no air conditioning, I've drunk a gallon of iced tea. I'm wiped out—the heat, plus I've been doing some sketching for the last two hours, my first serious sketching in *months*. Sweating and sketching. I feel so weird. Right at this moment you must be sitting in Gatsby's watching for me to walk in. You're probably thinking I'm unpunctual but that I may have redeeming qualities. In half an hour you will give up. God, I hope you don't phone me. Please don't—and please don't write to me again. It's too upsetting. I'm scared. Everything *means* too much!

You're not going to understand this.

Usually when I eat a hamburger I put ketchup on it like most people. But once in a while I suddenly decide to cover the hamburger with mustard, preferably *hot* mustard—for the thrill—that feeling of your mouth saying "Christ! This isn't what I wanted!"

But now I forget what point I was going to make. I'm not great at making points. Or not when I feel like this. Jim—I'm so scared by this thing happening between us. What thing you ask. Whatever this thing is that we are doing or about to do. It's bigger than we realize—deep water. Deep water with big green barracudas in it.

G.S. SHARAT CHANDRA

ARS POETICA

After four years
of teaching our checks
to the landlord
the grocer the doctor
the dentist the plumber
from bouncing,
my wife bought a Jordache
& a leather bag.

I traded the rest
of our family wealth
for a Hathaway patch
& a fifth of Glenfiddich.

Now when we drive
dressed up & drunk
the whole town
nods its head
in praise of poetry.

I haven't eaten all day. Iced tea is not food! Soon I'm going to eat some yogurt, very calmly—with extreme nonchalance. Then I'm going to call Sarah my sister-in-law (separated from Robert's older brother) and see if I can visit her in Great Barrington, for a few weeks. I have to make a change. Sarah has a room where I can paint.

This morning after I read your letter I drove to work and wherever I looked I saw people *trapped*, trapped by the heat—they *had* to wear certain clothes, they *had* to drink Cokes, the kids had no choice but to want to go swimming. Last summer I had no job and I would go by myself to North Shore beaches and let the sun eat me alive, it was like a test of my courage. And then to plunge into the ocean was like going from one kind of death to another. I watched the high school kids (I saw some today at the MDC pool) with their beautiful shoulders—they had no choice but to want each other and hurt each other.

Jim, I understand your white shirts. I really do. Maybe I'll paint you: Man in a White Shirt.

I'm not gone from your life forever. Some day—it might be as soon as the Fall—I'm going to walk up to you, maybe you'll be with Nancy—maybe at the Museum—and I'll just say something about where I have to go later, "a meeting of the Jaycees"—and she won't know what a world of feeling lies behind that phrase, as if beyond a flaming doorway!

Jean □

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TIMOTHY EARP

THE HILLS OF ANDORRA

Maxine Chernoff

When Mr. Ewell hired us, he spoke of three prohibitions: late arrivals, early departures, and consorting with the clientele. "Consorting" was the word he used, evoking black garters and women spies obscured by fog. Every waitress at the Silver Rooster was suspect. Mariel and I, younger by ten years, college-educated, part of the dwindling counter-culture of the mid-seventies, were below suspicion. What would women who wore no makeup, who didn't shave their legs, who probably thought a Tia Maria was a grenade used by Ché in the Bolivian jungle, want with paunchy businessmen doused in English Leather? I was twenty-three, finishing my thesis on Beckett; Mariel was twenty-four, trying to finance her journey westward to California, where James, the man she lived with, might pursue his set-designing career. His career was all Mariel's idea. At home James was happy painting detached human forms on their bedroom walls while Mariel supported him. I wanted to tell Mr. Ewell that it was James, not Mariel or I, who needed a rich liaison: his tastes ran toward designer bath sheets, Austrian goose comforters and brioche for breakfast, served on a rattan tray.

Mariel and I had actually met earlier, in a college German literature class, where the words slipped off her tongue, all honey and smoothness. Though I was expert at understanding, whenever I spoke the language I felt insulted on its behalf, as if calling upon me was an error of inclusion. Professor Hambling, raising his pointy chin and narrowing his eyes, would concentrate on an invisible umlaut on the ceiling. If my accent did anything, it betrayed my knowledge of Yiddish, learned from my grandmother. Mariel had been born in Germany after the war of a displaced Lithuanian father and a mother who'd fled Dresden during the bombings. The family clung to each other as many refugees do, seeing their daily existence somehow in peril despite an ample bank account and roasts on the table. Everyone worked to send money back to relatives who had stayed in Frankfurt, whom Mariel would visit, bringing home lovely souvenirs to decorate her apartment: dishtowels embroidered with aphorisms about *Gemütlichkeit,* miniature finches tweeting atop a teapot when the water boiled, doilies scented in rose water, porcelain baby dolls, their curly hair the texture of cornsilk.

Even at work Mariel was discriminating. While I

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fretted behind the waitress station for eating a forbidden muffin, Mariel pilfered whole steaks, etched sherry glasses, wicker wine stands. Maybe in the gray barracks of the D.P. camp where she had been born, her first feeling of deprivation had been an aesthetic one. Whatever the reason for her needs, she tried brazenly to satisfy them, sneaking past hotel security every night. Did her quilted purse contain special compartments for contraband? Happy as a prince, she'd display her daily plunder to me at the bus stop. Alone in my apartment after work, amid my useful possessions, paperback books, an oak writing desk, an aluminum teapot, I admired Mariel's style.

There is a theory that all public servants are frustrated performers. Why else did Anton, our *maitre d'*, add capers to the steak tartare so slowly that tension built? Why did Yvonne, a career waitress whose coif resembled a ruined birthday cake, fix her nylons in a mirror that customers might observe? And why did I practice applying Brandied Raisin lipstick, which I'd never worn before, in the breadknife's blade, as Yvonne had demonstrated that rainy, slow morning when Mariel didn't arrive until noon?

Yes, Mariel was often late, defying rule number one. And sometimes she left early because of terrible menstrual cramps. She blamed them on her Catholic upbringing, the fears and cautions against showing one's legs, wearing silk underwear, and coming of age, as if someone could will otherwise. Having matured young, she felt the twisting ever after; monthly she was doubled by it, bent sideways. Despite Anton's patience and my efficiency at covering two waitress stations, despite the painkillers Yvonne dispensed from her locker room apothecary, Mariel would leave work early and creep to a cab to frighten the driver with her paleness, convinced that her womanhood was cursed.

Perhaps she was right. Three weeks after she was hired, Mariel was fired for breaking rule number three. Over coffee and stale sweet rolls in the employees' cafeteria, a veteran bellhop approached us. He needed a woman that night to act as "secretary" to a visiting manufacturer, to accompany him and a client to dinner and to make herself available afterward. The pay was two hundred dollars, all that Mariel needed to make her escape to California. "After you," we both teased each other, but as we joked a feeling rose up in my stomach more sour than the warmed-over coffee. Mariel was considering the offer; I could tell by the way we stopped looking at each other.

Mariel never got to the floor that day. Apparently a house detective, one of those comical dog-eared, fray-cuffed, droopy-eyed snoops, caught wind of the deal before it was concluded. Later I imagined old Ewell lying in bed, his arthritic knees flaming, devising the plan to test his new employees. Mariel was hustled out of the hotel, warned never to return under penalty of law. The bellhop-turned-pimp got off free. At least they could have stripped him of his fake brass epaulets. I spent the rest of the summer explaining Mariel's absence to the customers who missed her "Who gives a shit?" way of sliding their drinks onto the table, her style. Mariel's only regret: she still needed two more etched sherry glasses to finish her set.

Even before I opened the letter, I could tell by its scented beeswax seal that it was from Mariel. I was living with Peter, enjoying the first months of nesting, when even grocery shopping is magnetic. We would stop to buy raspberry-coconut juice or to admire the blatantly sexual squash. Once Peter met Mariel at a party, but all he remembered was a woman with brown hair. Mariel was plain. Above average height, dark-eyed, there was nothing to distinguish her, except an occasional accessory, like a pearl nose ring. My own dim surroundings had taken a turn for the better. I imagined her approving of our Polish circus posters, our Indian floormats, and our Wagnerian candelabra—a full-busted, green-winged Valkyrie carved from wood.

Mariel and James, her friend Sharon and his friend Russ, moved to San Francisco that fall. Along the way there were failures, mechnical and human. James's jalopy, a '62 Chrysler, broke down in Salt Lake City. Sharon spoke of self-immolation at Lake Tahoe. Settling near the Presidio in an apartment too small for two, the four constantly bickered. While James half-heartedly looked for a job with a theatre company, he worked for a Japanese landscape gardener. All day he crawled in the dirt or carried burlap-swathed evergreens from truck to soil. The owner planted everything himself while James tilled the earth. It was very biblical. Mariel was a pastry waitress in a ritzy cafe on Union Street that catered to young tourists. Though the pay was good, she detested the little dirndl skirts and puff-sleeved blouses. They reminded her of her D.P. photos, only now she was taller than her father was then.

Often Mariel spoke of her father, how during the war he'd hidden in the woods for six months to avoid the Russians, how at night he'd repaired trains to evacuate Lithuanian freedom-fighters from the countryside, a candle his only light. He still had pitch-black hair, a droopy moustache, and fiery eyes. James was a poor imitation. Thin and frail, he could have fit inside her father like those wooden dolls containing ever smaller versions. After six months of close quarters, the group split up: Sharon, to be healed by a masseur schooled in herbology; Russ, to a group of Gay Rights street mimes. Sometimes Mariel would see him playing a flute or giving away flowers at Ghiardelli. On Castro Street James ran into Michael, a former lover, and decided to move in with him. Mariel showed no resentment, just spoke of cultivating a California tan, watching whales spout off the coast and planning another trip to Germany. I didn't hear from her the rest of the year.

Men to whom I am attracted are always the physical opposite of my short, bald father. Peter was a tow-head, a foot taller at 6'4". That we were still living together after a year testified to my insight in avoiding fatherly types. By now we'd merged our checking accounts, bought a sofa with joint funds, and shared an electric typewriter. Peter was working in book design for a university press and I was substituting at an alternative school for pregnant girls when we received a postcard with the photo of a glistening herring: "Back from Germany and Scandinavia. I have my hair cut short like a boy's. I am living with a man

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named Roger. He's a comedian—and FUNNY!" I wrote to tell Mariel that in a few months Peter and I would be coming West to see my sister in Marin. Hopefully we could arrange a night on the town.

Before our trip was scheduled, I received a few more letters from Mariel, each a messy parcel of grief. Mariel had had an abortion and felt very bad. At the efficient new clinic, all aluminum and white tile, they had hurried through it; there'd been a lot of pain and blood. In the recovery room afterwards, Mariel was the oldest, but despite her desire to comfort the other girls, some as young as thirteen, her screams were so loud and persistent that they had to give her a sedative. Sharon had really tried to kill herself (by Seconal rather than fire), and her mother had come all the way from Chicago to take her home. If Roger was funny, I couldn't discern his influence on Mariel's letter, except in the following detail: Sharon's mother was terrified of planes, so she'd taken Greyhound west. By the time she arrived, frantic with visions of Sharon in a locked ward or a zipped morgue bag, Sharon was feeling so much better that she refused to leave. Sharon and her mother spent the next week at Fisherman's Wharf buying all the cheap keepsakes they could load into shopping bags.

About a month later, another letter arrived, misery seeping through like a bathtub overflowing on a rug. Roger was back working in a sporting goods store after losing the comic lead in a play. Mariel had had a second abortion, this one a cinch compared to the first. Then Roger's adoptive mother had sent him an urgent letter. She'd received word that Roger's real father had Woody Guthrie's disease, and that Roger had a fifty per cent chance of contracting it by age forty. If Mariel stayed with Roger, they could never have children. I imagined that at this rate Mariel would have twenty-four abortions before she reached menopause.

Mariel's boyish razorcut, her new thinness and Roger's vivacious hostility were all unanticipated. Peter didn't recognize Mariel at all, having remembered a different person with a nose ring from the party. Surrounded by blue-haired elders brought by sightseeing bus, stop number three, we spent the evening at Finocchio's, a slick transvestite nightclub. I kept evaluating Roger's movements for symptoms of the disease. Remembering how ravaged Woody Guthrie appeared in *Alice's Restaurant*, I gasped when Roger bumped into another table on the way to our seats. Onstage a beautiful platinum blonde transvestite with real cleavage sang "Moon River" so intensely it made me nervous. The sad transvestites, those with muscles bulging under their slit gowns and fishnet hose, were saved for the chorus line. One was Chinese, petite with a waist-length fall and delicate eyelids. The face was beautiful but the legs were wrestler's, the feet wide enough to support Rodin's statue of Balzac. We walked around Broadway and said good-bye at the bus to the Sausalito ferry. Mariel and I had spoken little. She was wholly self-absorbed, turned inward like a clam. It might have been Mariel, rather than Roger, who was dying of something romantic and devastating. Worried for both of them, I clung to Peter on the ship's top deck. I felt colder than reasonable, since the wind was still and the night air filled with warm vapor, clouding the lights on the distant hills of the bay.

Peter and I broke up. He accepted a book-designing job in New York and moved there on his savings, leaving me a couch and a distaste for raspberry-coconut juice. There had been no intrigue, just a gradual wearing down of the mechanism for concern. Still feeling numb and displaced, I found a job teaching English and German at a small parochial school. Grading essays on "Successful Women in Science" and eating canned gazpacho soup, I opened the first letter Mariel had sent in months. Like those colorful seed packets advertised in Sunday magazines that one never orders for fear they won't sprout, Mariel's ornate envelope was full of disappointments. Roger had gone to visit his family in Texas, where he met an old high school girlfriend. I imagined Cybille Shepherd in *The Last Picture Show*. He had decided to stay with her. Mariel wondered whether he had made up the whole story of Woody Guthrie's disease so that she wouldn't decide to stay pregnant. Mariel was angry. She'd been tricked and didn't trust men. I sent her back a commiserating letter, telling her my own problems with Peter. "We're going through our petulant mid-twenties. Let's seclude ourselves in the hills of Andorra and wait for wisdom." I never received an answer to the letter. Before she received it, Mariel had left for Frankfurt, where her favorite aunt was dying.

In Germany Mariel learned that her father had been an enemy of the Russians not for his freedom-fighting but for his Nazi collaboration. He was still subject to extradition by the U.S. government should they uncover his activities. The secret Aunt Lydia was going to take to the grave was told to Mariel in her aunt's hospital room eleven days before she died. I imagined theatrical stage whispers, powerful organ music. Mariel promised not to tell anyone. Supposedly her mother had never known and wasn't to know. Only I knew and the letter should be destroyed. Holding it over my Wagnerian candelabra, I turned it to ash; it seemed an appropriately dramatic gesture. At the same time I damned her for the knowledge. Kept awake by it at night, I saw her father repairing death trains by candlelight. I pictured rows of sad Jewish faces lined up at a snowy station. In my half-sleep version, Mariel's father confiscated their purses and kept the valuables, tossing the useless or sentimental onto the tracks. No wonder her mother had a boyfriend, I thought, a sad little man from church who designed surgical tools and was called "Uncle" by the family. No wonder her father's recent layoff from his job as a diesel mechanic was a symbol of doom, causing a two week collapse and a nervous reunion at his bedside. Still, I assured Mariel I'd visit when I came West that summer.

The afternoon of the visit, I was in charge of my nieces, ages four and six. Lilly, the older, has black wavy hair and aquamarine eyes. Miranda is chestnut: hair, skin, eyes, warm as a sunspot on a rug. In a pink stucco apartment house we met Mariel's new boyfriend, Carlos, a wealthy Spaniard. He was working as a waiter at the St. Francis until he found the best place in the city to open a grillade. The visit came shortly after Franco's death and

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Prince Juan Carlos's democratization of the country. Though I knew little of Spanish politics, I had read *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and had seen *Guernica*. I expected that Carlos, whom Mariel had described as passionate and full of ideas, would be basking in his country's good fortune.

Mariel was wearing a purple silk Japanese robe. Her hair was long again and pulled back at her temples with red combs. She had never looked more radiant. The apartment smelled of strong coffee and baking bread, the product, a braided wreath, surrounded by earthenware jars of sweet butter, jam and honey. The other aroma was musk oil, emanating from Carlos, who, like all of Mariel's boyfriends, was short, slightly built and handsome. His eyes were the color of Lilly's. In fact, he asked if my nieces were Spanish, for they looked like so many children in Barcelona.

"Russian and Romanian, Jewish," I answered.

In all seriousness Carlos said, "Such nice-looking people are rare here." Puzzled, I wondered if Mariel had ghoulish acquaintances.

"Carlos thinks Americans are ugly because there's so much mixing of nationalities," Mariel explained. Worse yet, I could tell she believed what she was saying. Aside from wanting to look in a mirror, I was unable to respond. I imagined dachshunds welded to airedales, the union of a fish and a goat. My mind spun with mythological half-breeds.

The children, unaware of the tension in the dining room, munched on huge chunks of bread that Carlos tore off with his hands, tried on Mariel's straw hats, and chirped back at her canary, Liebchen. Lilly cradled a clown doll, twisting its orange straw hair. Miranda pored over the black, thickly inked wood carving in a German fairy tale book. Afraid to probe further, I drank my coffee. When I could no longer stand my own silence, I asked Carlos how he liked the new government in Spain. "With Franco we had money. Now we have taxes, very bad for families like mine. Money is freedom." The sour feeling rose in my stomach. I wanted to take the children away. I wanted to cut myself out of the scene with the precision surgical instruments Mariel's "Uncle" designed. Instead, I said a polite good-bye to Carlos when he left for work and even let him kiss my hand.

I spent a long afternoon with Mariel, listening to her reminisce about Professor Hambling, Mister Ewell, James, Sharon, Russ, Roger, Peter, Aunt Lydia, her father. I was floating underwater. I watched indistinct shadows lengthen and consume each other. Weighed down, I couldn't have moved if the children needed me. I thought of my own father, short, bald, pale-eyed, honest, dead the same year Mariel had her abortions. For the first time in years I remembered the maple hutch where he kept his war mementos: a saucer-sized piece of shrapnel, a photo of his supply ship, before-and-after Navy-issue postcards of Nagasaki. I hoped my mother hadn't kept the grim souvenirs after he died. I didn't want to see Mariel again. There was too much death between us. Yet as I listened to her describing our times together, holding each moment up in the dim, webbed light of late afternoon, I understood. A refugee child, Mariel saved things. I was American; I wanted to throw everything away. □

ED OCHESTER

POEM FOR BASHO

If I am timorous and
hesitant to intrude
on your privacy,

forgive me, for though
every poet in New York
has written a poem to you

it is different here
where one farm does not wish
to violate another

farm's solitude, but
if after 300 years you
were here in this valley

perhaps you would write
about the mouse who
every night travels out

to eat at the dog's dish.
And I think you would like
the wind stunted spruce

and the way the drip, drip
of the sink gathers
the night around it.

Basho, here is my yellow glass.
I am alone, but happy because
I do not have to be alone.

You understood that, surely?
How one of the pleasures
of silence is finally

returning to your friends.
Even though, no doubt, they thought
you slightly peculiar.

What are the colors of flowers
at night? And, Basho, will you
have another glass of rice wine

or whiskey? Basho, may
I show you a poem I've just written?
Basho, what are 300 years?

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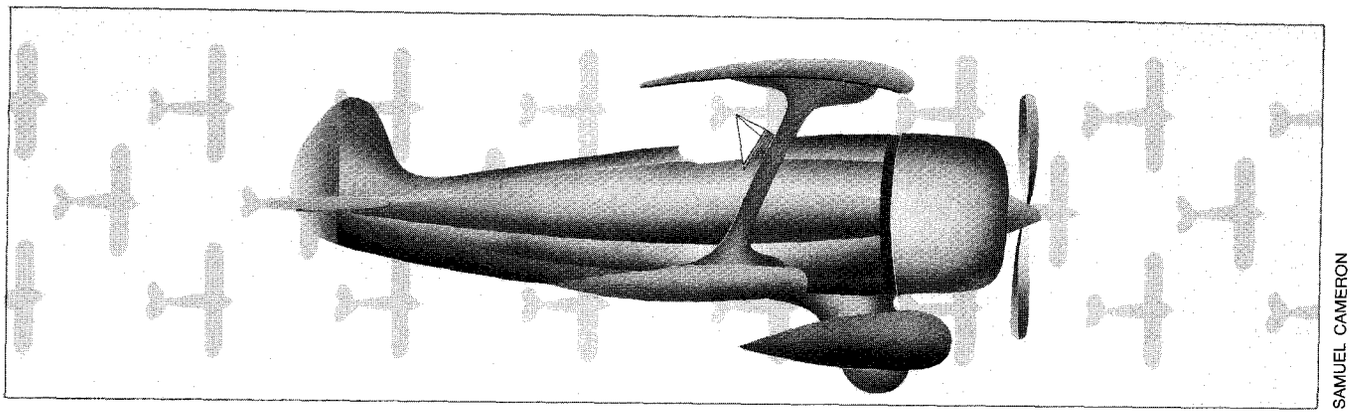

SAMUEL CAMERON

FLY TO FLY

Scott Purdin

EA, Loosiana: 1958 Johanny Rho-Shiek twenty and Ira Eaker sixteen. Not much on school (what genius is), the boy Ira dropped out to build his first airplane, a single-engine contraption that looked like a pear with wings; said he was going to carry his sweetheart into the heavens and never come back. His Heart, SoRelle "the Belle" Pleasance, wouldn't go. She said Ira was nuts and a loner and should have finished high school. Still, despite odds and Newton's law of falling bodies, the pear flew, really just wobbled into the sky.

People in East Ascension still recall that sad crisp November day, hurricane weather, when propelled by lawnmower guts and genius (don't forget genius, it's got more thrust than a V-8), popping and backfiring and spitting, Ira took to the sky. He said EA was no place for a star and he wasn't coming back and wouldn't have if he could've just gotten across the Mississippi (it's a hell of a lot wider than you think). Instead, after a hundred yards or so, he ran out of gas and brought the plane down on Africa Street.

Johanny Rho-Shiek was there. He saw it all. Blind, hip, spinner of audio light, down street musician, saxophone man. Cool then and cool now. He was on Africa Street when Ira fell, just playing the wind. He was the one off to the side, leaning against a building, smoking dope. Puffing hydrangea wings, he calls it.

No time. No luck. And nothing to do but, Rho-Shiek said. In life it is waiting. A baby is born, a plane is waiting. You can hear the engine in the wail. For every child there is a plane, there is a sky, there is a note, there is a horn, there is the blues, there is a fall, and there is a father. You just.

Ira's was *the* Louis Eaker, heart surgeon. No pilot he. No flyer in his soul. Tone death. He couldn't carry a tune. He sang no song. Flew no sky. He drove or went by bus. Always on the ground. The man wouldn't fly. "No way you'll get me up there. Unnatural," Louis said.

Conceited Louis was. The man saw himself as built on the rock of rocks, science and his own mind (even odds as to which he thought was righter). Louis knew. That's what Louis knew. He knew what. That's what he knew. And he knew it sharper than most (or so he thought). What he knew was how to make a success of your life. Not flying. That's for damn sure. You made a success of your life stitching hearts and souls. Opening chests. Putting in valves. This was the way life went. Offices were life, not sky. Louis knew what a lot of people didn't. That you build your life on cement, not on sand or worse, on air (air being the closest thing to nothing there is). Fix your life on cement, he had told Ira. Go to med school, he had told Ira. Make the grade. Graduate from high school. Get with it. Succeed and fast. There's no time for slipping. There's only time for getting ahead and getting with it. Believe me, Louis said. Ira listened and dropped out.

He was full of the heavens. Born with the fly in his soul. The fly in he and the fly in all. It's there . . . like the wind. And a note. It waits. The soul. Like a note for a horn. Like a baby for a plane. It is fly. There are wings. But who believes? Who believes the blind? Who believes a broken field? Who believes what is or the song you hear on a silent night as Rho-Shiek plays a duet with church bells.

Where was Louis when Ira fell? He was checking hearts, pressing practical solutions, just doing his job, he said. He was talking wills with Lady Schumard, interior designer and a good one. Very liberal. Cute. And she had them both balanced on a heating unit by the window, her dress up, knees apart (off the record, of course)—Louis no gynecologist but he knew the ropes—heart going ninety to nothing. I've got a good beat, he might say. She had come on account of Louis wanting a new interior but all of a sudden all this earthy stuff got going, he said.

(It happens. Believe me, it happens and Louis was so damn goodlooking. He had bedroom eyes, the lady said, and a bedroom butt. Hard for women to resist and why. This man was gorgeous and smart and worth a ten-story building. He was married, too; nobody cares about that. Just Louis's damn wife but she doesn't count.)

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So Lady Schumard wasn't resisting. No need to resist. And in the midst of beeps and what goes where, Louis and Lady got into it. An accident, he said. First a nudge, just shoulders; then a glancing hand (you've got to watch those glancing hands), and finally Louis just mashed her, she said. Put himself right on top and jammed both of them to a heating unit, she said. Not much she could do. She thought what the hell and closed her eyes or so she says.

If Louis had turned to look out his window, he would have seen the crash like Rho-Shiek, witnessed the fall. He didn't. Later he said (and a man'll say things one day he won't say the next): "How could I know what in the hell was going on in that damn garage? How many kids build airplanes? I work, you know. I work hard. I work eight, nine, ten hours a day, at least, and that's a lot. I can't know everything. My wife should know something, shouldn't she?" (And so on and so on with Louis's side but there's a hexagon of sides and you look for a voice like truth and you find that even a story gets lost in the flying of life and finally there's only a doper telling you what you can't.)

"He's just spreading his wings, Louis. We all do," his wife said. (Ask Lady Schumard, she knows about spreading wings somebody ought to be saying but won't.)

"I'm gonna clip those wings," Louis said. (Always the final solution: clip, clip, clip.)

"They're like rivers," his wife said. "Children. You channel them too much and they choke."

"Bullshit," shot back Louis. (Who listens to a wife?)

Louis didn't care what his wife felt or what anybody felt. He knew he was right. Wasn't he right about everything? He was a surgeon. And hearts were everywhere and most needed fixing. He was up to his ears in hearts. And he wouldn't have Ira turning out to be a flyboy. Living on air. Not much of a life. The world didn't need more of that. God, no. It needed people who sewed up chests, who built houses, who wrote wills, and poured cement, who added and subtracted and drove trucks. Louis knew what this world needed. Didn't it traipse through his office every single day of the year? Certainly did, man.

He burned the plane. Then he packed Ira off to McKinley Military. (The boy survived the crash. Didn't anybody tell you that? Probably not. Isn't anybody telling this story straight? But it's not a story. It's murder. Just wait.) Dear wife bit her nails. There are worse things than turning into a flyboy, she said. (Like adultery but she didn't say. Like you know she didn't know or she feared to say. Is there any difference finally?)

Louis didn't listen to his wife or anybody. Not even his own conscience. (I don't think he had one.) I'm right, he said. And over and over again.

What did Ira think? What can a little guy who's fallen think? Grounded. No t.v. And now the worst. Off to a strait jacket. But love? His Heart, remember. When it's not your own it's so easy to forget the other's guy's. Ira hated leaving. He couldn't leave while his SoRelle remained behind. She was dream. She was flight poster beauty. She was Betty Grable. She was love and the tie that binds. God, he shrined her. He confessed her. She was obsession. And she snubbed him always.

As Louis packed the boy off, as if by fate they passed SoRelle. She was sitting on a towel in her front yard, just sunning, back arched to the heavens. Ira couldn't move. He couldn't wave. Both arms were in casts and his right leg. He craned his neck. He stared. She never looked better. He wiggled his fingers.

You hold a kite and you let it go. That's what was happening. Ira didn't know it. Louis didn't pause. He knew hearts. You grow up. You put your feet on the ground. You don't screw around with planes. You do an honest day's work. He floored the gas. Ira's heart blew out of his hand. It sailed like a paper airplane to no one. It sailed and sailed.

At McKinley Military, Ira lay and lay. He lay in his bed and built dreams. He wanted to be like Captain Nemo and float a thousand leagues above. He wanted to find a way to turn air into water and clouds into seaweed and always to be above, always in the clouds, sailing and a-sailing with SoRelle "the Belle."

You put your mind there. You put your mind there and you keep it there. You put it in the clouds. Then you barrel-roll from one dream to the next. The casts came off. The arm healed. He was ready for school but he lay. Not a word. He lay and he lay. Wouldn't move. He wouldn't walk. There was flying or nothing.

"As good as a pencil," the corps commander said. "Your boy needs help. Serious help. Better take him to a nuthouse."

Louis brought him home. Not a word. Not a move. They might as well have left him in the cast. Wife watched him. "He's not gone," she said. "He's just sleeping off a bad fall. He'll be back. My boy flew to fly and crashed. He'll fly again. Just watch." She knew that if what goes up must come down then what comes down must go up and she knew that clipped wings grow back. (Like I said, who listens to a wife?)

Louis didn't want any wings. He wanted a walker and a talker. He wanted a son who'd do the right thing and make something of himself. And he carried Ira from psychiatrist to psychologist to therapist to analyst; from T-Group to Learning Situations. Ira the torch frozen like cement, not saying a word, not making a move, just a lay. Frozen like a popsicle.

"Make him right," Louis said. They tried. They gave it a hell of a shot. Science tried. The best minds gave it their best shot. Groups of minds gave it a group shot. Opinions on opinions. This move on that move. This psycho act followed by this psycho act. Louis watched. And Ira never moved. No talky. No words. This was bigger than a war. Bigger wills. Bigger inwardnesses. Louis had his cannons. Ira had his trench. No move. Just like a pencil. In desperation Louis took Ira to the Valkyries Institute in Alaska.

Outdoor therapy.

"We don't fail," Herman Valkyries told Louis. "Freud's out. Fromm's passé. Valkyries is in. We've taken the worst. We've taken people like rocks and made them soft as mud. Believe me. You put a boy in nature and let him grow. Nature never fails. Science can't touch nature."

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Winter therapy first. Ira stood out on the Malaspina Glacier. The logic was that if Ira thinks he's frozen, then let him freeze. Make the son of a bitch freeze or move. "That's nature," Herman told Louis. "Nature gives you the will to live, believe me."

Still Ira didn't move. The Malaspina Glacier moved an inch but Ira not a twitch. He was at attention, a man holding his breath. He knew the world. He knew what the world could do to a man. He knew there was only one way: you put your back to the wall and not move. No flinch. You move and you die. You think and you die. You have your will and what is and that's it. 2 + 2 = 5 if you believe it long enough, if you grit your teeth hard enough and remain as you are forever.

"Set the boy straight, Herman," Louis screamed.

"Time," Herman said, "heals all wounds."

"Who says it's a wound!"

"It's a wound," Herman said. "I know a wound when I see a wound. There's a wound here."

"Screw wounds." Louis would have taken Ira out of the Valkyries Institute but nowhere else to go. No one had hope, no one else wanted to try; only Herman, and Herman not much.

"Just give nature a decent shot, man."

Nature had a year. The glacier moved. Ira not. How do you break a mindset?

"Thaw him out, Herman," Louis hollered.

No battle like the one for life and cloud. And Herman about to quit, about to throw in the towel, that's what he told the Annual Meeting of Outdoor Therapists: "I've failed. I've met my match. I was doing real great until I ran into Ira Eaker. This boy is really something. He makes Mother Nature look like silly putty. Believe me."

But God sent a way. Where Herman failed, God prevailed. Simple as 2 + 2 = 5. SoRelle sent Ira a wedding invitation. She was marrying Pegasus Stoffard, an air traffic controller at the city airport. "I don't love hIm," she scribbled. "But who says life's supposed to be happy anyway." Between the words, she drew a small biplane in the shape of a heart. "Signed: Betty G." Could it be that all along SoRelle loved him?

Icicles shivered in the wind. Ira's eyes the color of hail. Fingers tight to his side. He was a missile. More like a missile than a man.

"You see this, Ira," Herman said. "This is the woman you love. This is your girl and she's marrying this Stoffard guy. Sounds like a dirty deal. Sounds like bad shit. Do you know what it means, son? Do you have any idea what it means when the woman you love marries another guy?"

Ira did not move. A snowflake. Then nothing.

"I'll tell you what it means. It means the damn pine cone has dropped off the limb. It means one more good woman has bitten the dust. It means you'll be seeing nothing but sunsets from here on in. It means you're better off dead. And don't think it doesn't mean a hell of a lot of other things. Meaning's all over this invitation. And don't think Herman doesn't know love. Herman knows love, believe me."

If Ira saw any meaning, he didn't show it. At least not then, but two days later, middle of the night, he came out of his cloud. In the midst of his mindset, he blinked. Oh, Heart, my SoRelle.

No time. No luck. But that's life. And nothing to do but. He stole Herman's personal plane, a cigar-shaped torpedo with windows like skull caps. Ira knifed the engines into the heavens and bombed towards the stars. He was going home.

"Do you read me?" the Malaspina Control Tower said. "Who are you? Please identify yourself. What is your destination? This is the FAA speaking."

No answer. Nothing. All was too late. A fight goes so far and then it passes. It becomes murder. Now it was murder.

The Air Force sent up scouts. Jets ordered him down. You can't have a plane loose in the heavens. Especially an unidentified one. You can't stay up forever. It's just a matter of time before you run out of gas.

They were right. But no word from Ira. His eyes were closed. He was nowhere and he liked being nowhere. Just in the sky. He was a big no with clouds on his tail going home.

The jets hung close. They were waiting for some word. Do you shoot a guy down for flying? He was a loony. Do you shoot a loony? These guys weren't trained in existential questions. They knew how to obey and fly jets. And they knew you don't unleash a quarter of a million dollar Sidewinder Missile without some order from above. And the above wasn't speaking on Ira Eaker.

It was on the news that he was coming. Ira Eaker and his plane. He reached us and the Mississippi that night. There was no stopping the crossing this time. He would make it. He circled over going back and forth. He crossed it and recrossed. An engine sputtered. (Even gas gives out in the end. He was coming home.)

EA, Loosiana saw it for miles. It drew a crowd like the crowd of crowds that mobbed Lindbergh at LeBourget Field in Paris. It drew crowds and it drew the police. It drew the FBI. It was a Federal crime to be in the heavens, to steal a plane. He had broken the law. He had broken the law and the frame; that frame being reality. It was all a matter of perspective. The FBI and Louis on one side (never good to be on Louis's side but how could the FBI know; they can't know everything) and Ira and all those dreams on the other. The war was in its last stages and Louis had brought in a ringer: the government.

Ira came in off the Mississippi. He bypassed the airport. He came directly towards the center of town. From the ground you could see the tiny speck in the night, a red light twirling around. As it sailed lower, you realized he was going to land on the main street, USA Boulevard.

He brought the plane in on its belly. No gear flaps. No wheels. The wing wrenched, lopping off streetlights, gouging furrows in the pavement. Cars were clipped like heads of lettuce as the twin-engine monster finally caterwauled to a stop, fluttering and panting.

Ira stayed in the cockpit. He had survived his destination, another crash. He had slipped the camel through the eye of another needle. A divine wind had brought him safely home to nowhere a star belonged. No woman came to be his, to smile at him, and wave. No woman like all the

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women Lindbergh must have had was there to take the seeds of his genius into her womb.

You fly through life like a pumpkin. You get a bellyful. You think of yourself: Luftwaffe Pilot. Then you commit a crime. You take off. You are a fallen angel. You are in the heavens and there is no one to hold your hand (not even Mom). You run out of gas and you crash. Even if you are blind. That's the way the story goes.

There is much to say about a hero and the newspaper tried. It said the crime was against the United States. It said the police roped off the destruction and let the FBI handle Ira. Ira screamed he would never. Some say the FBI shot him jumping out of the cockpit, his arms spread to the four winds like a man parachuting out without a parachute, dying as he hit the earth.

Others say he escaped this crash, too; and died mysteriously like Amelia Earhart, disappearing west of the Southern Cross out over the Gulf of Mexico: Destination Unknown (where could he go?). And these same people like to say that SoRelle saw him off, pulling him to her bosom, once, just once. They like to think that Ira had that last pleasure that all men dream of having, the dream of youth buoyed gently to where lovers must finally remain, near some cool sparkling brook within earshot of a harvest song, him telling her he would fly again and again and always for her, the Spirit of St. Louis of his heart. Nice to think that way. Nice to think Louis is an all-around nice guy and nice to think life is nice and nice to think but.

The last scene I will never forget is as they carried Ira away dead on a stretcher, the plane shuddered. I heard one engine give a final gasp, a splutter of oil, and spin itself for the last time kicking a hole in the earth like a drummer calling it quits. That said it all for me.

But other things happened that people still remember. Most remember how East Ascensioners drove by the plane, touching it, stealing bits of wings so that they would know and always know that this thing had truly happened, that it wasn't just a story. It was like art now. More than art. It was a dream even.

But they missed the point. For them it was a plane landing downtown, it was a sixteen-year-old flying, it was a defiant young rebel versus the FBI. It was a story that was saying something. (It always has to doesn't it?) The world is slick and smart. It turns a phrase. It makes cars and cement. It sees Louis as success. Ira and me are failure. I see it all and I see little that is worth seeing. I'm seeing blind. And I see Ira taking off into the heavens. He is saying: this is what happens to guys like us. This is where we are going, my friends. And he's saying more. He's saying you get off the ground. You push for the heavens. You run out of gas and there's nowhere to turn. You look down but no one's got any gas to give. Not any more. So you've got a choice. You can keep climbing till you fall apart or you can try to land. You can jam it in some place even in the dark where there's no place to jam and they're still waiting: the crowds and the guns. You're the sideshow. You're the man with a horn. You're murder. You point a finger. You blow a last note and crash one more time. And all you've got (if you're lucky) is some doper like Rho-Shiek playing your fall. □

DAVID BAKER

WEB

Hardly more than a salting
  of frost on a single leaf,
a nest of fog, the web
appeared in the morning light
  in the walnut tree.
I thought it would burn off —

dew in the warming sun. It stayed.
  It grew, though not so
perceptibly day by day —
rather at moments when
  weeks had passed, when I held her
near the window, both of us

startled by the change. "There,
  see how it's grown?"
Yes, she'd say, already going,
yes: though sometimes I
  would stay a little longer:
how the gray-white gauze of web

had spread, a few more leaves
  caught up and curled
brown, the quiet worms at work.
Yes, like summer going.
  Yes, until I could not
bear the dying tree

and so, wrapping pages
  of the unread evening news
and lighting the tip into a torch,
I went into the yard alone,
  walnuts, old leaves
in the yellow grass,

and raised my arms together,
  awkward candle, raised
myself to touch it. It was gone,
vanished before I knew,
  burned before I burned it
by the fierce, simple

nearness of the flame: *yes*,
taken, like love, before I knew,
  without a touch.

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MARK ALDRICH

THE WOMAN WHO COULDN'T IMAGINE MEN

Joan Givner

In childhood, she knew that her friends had fathers (as indeed she herself had) but they were always absent. A war was in progress and the men were attending it. Those who returned (her own father was not among them) quickly resumed their regular jobs in offices, banks and similar institutions. They disappeared early in the morning and, when she visited her friends, their fathers were never there. Wherever she was, men were elsewhere.

Each Sunday in church, the congregation was made up mostly of women. The rest were young choristers in whom the stigmata of sex were not yet marked, or elderly vestry-men in whom they had been erased. The Vicar in his long robe seemed more female than male. And even the deity in the stained-glass window over the high altar, hanging his head under his bridal wreath of thorns, seemed delicate and maidenly.

Her tadpoles, when they grew limbs, left the confinement of her goldfish tank to be small frogs in larger waters. Likewise, the boys in her grade-school class, when they started to turn into men, were transferred to boys' grammar schools. Henceforth, she recognized them on the peripheries of her vision by their uniforms and their loud voices. But they were diminished, blurred in outline. They seemed like so many toy soldiers and she could not believe in the reality of them.

She tried to summon up the image of her dead father by studying the photograph of him on her mother's dressing table. She saw a seated bride, crowned with orange-blossom, cradling a sheaf of arum lilies as if it were an infant in baptismal robes. The bride was encased in satin, cloaked in a long tulle veil, enisled in lace which swirled around her feet like great white waves. The bridegroom peeped from behind in his black suit, looking like a telegraph-boy, irrelevant to the main event, completely anonymous. She sought her mother's help in trying to restore his identity to him.

"What was my father like?"

"He was a man of honor who gave his life for his country."

"But do you remember him?"

"Time heals, but the scars remain."

She could imagine welts in pudgy soft brain tissue, but her obstinate father refused to appear. In her English class at school, she studied figures of speech. She could define simile, metaphor, personification. "These present pictures so that we can visualize the invisible, see the abstract in concrete terms. For instance, in the description 'Spring comes striding o'er the lea.' "

"I don't get it," said her incredibly stupid and literal-minded friend, "what's a lea?"

She herself could not explain exactly what a lea was, but she had a rich fantasizing imagination and she could envision a hillock, a grass verge, or a dune by the sea. And how clearly she could see Spring herself, Primavera, striding o'er the hillock, verge or dune, wearing a green robe and carrying armfuls of primroses and bluebells.

Given her capacity for casting the abstract in concrete terms, it was astonishing that she could not stretch her imagination to encompass a man. When she recited "Our Father which art in Heaven. . . ." it pained her that she could visualize a tangible loaf of bread, but could manage only a blank space for the person who was supposed to supply it. She was conscious of a distressing void in her head. She had no frame of reference, no memory, nothing to help her summon up the image of her heavenly father, any more than her earthly one who had sacrificed his life.

The girls in her school were man-hungry, boy-crazy, sex-starved. All about her head, like gnats swarming in summer heat, buzzed talk of men, men, men. "That's where it's at, kiddo," they told her. But wherever it was at, she seemed not to be.

In books, she could relate to female characters down

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the ages—Dido, Miss Haversham, Mr. Rochester's first wife. When they went up in flames, she felt the heat. Jocasta, Antigone, Tess of the D'Urbervilles. When they hanged, she felt the noose tighten about her own neck. Cleopatra, Anna Karenina, Candace Compson. Whatever their fates, she felt them herself, the snake-bite, the train-wheels, the annihilating drugs. But when she contemplated their male counterparts, all remained as shadowy as Banquo's ghosts. Their brandished knives had no edge for her, their spears no force. She could not connect herself with them or any of their experiences. The urge to kill another was lacking in her.

When she tried to draw men, they minced across the page like so many women in drag. Even in kingly robes, coats of armor, pin-striped suits they resembled women at masquerade balls. Her Henry V looked like Joan of Arc with a crude beard. Her Henry the Eighth like Queen Elizabeth, padded and moustached. Her Henry Higgins, a vaudeville comedienne. She was skilled enough at drawing to consider working as an illustrator. But her particular blind-spot threatened to limit her to a career of children's books with animals dressed up as humans. She could not face a lifetime with Rat and Mole, Frog and Toad and Winnie the Pooh.

She learned in school: "We can apprehend facts without acknowledging them emotionally. This is a form of self-protection. Hence we know the fact of our own mortality, but we do not accept or believe in it." But she could well imagine her own mortality, a world from which she had passed. She saw her room stripped and bare as a tomb, her coffin carried away, her name engraved on a marble stone, her mother intoning: "Time heals but the scars remain."

It was only at the thought of a man that her eyesight weakened, her imagination failed and her mind boggled. But she was not one to accept defeat easily. She determined to overcome what she perceived to be a serious handicap. She realized that her battle would be a lonely one, for there were no self-help books that recognized her condition, gave it a name ending in -thrope, -nesia or -phobe, and presented a formula for overcoming it. Nor could she look for the understanding of family and friends. When she explained that she found men inconceivable, they agreed. "Absolutely *unimaginable*, you said it, kid."

"But I mean literally," she said plaintively.

Here and there, reading women poets and novelists, she thought she detected a mind-set like her own, and she decided to study literature in a women's college. From the minute she arrived, she felt at home in the studious, cloistered atmosphere, the air of peace and calm. But, as at her girls' school, the college women were much preoccupied with men. She hoped to use their preoccupation to break her own log-jam. If anyone said, "Hey, I met this absolutely super chap," she asked her to describe him, hoping that the woman's passion and her own craving would somehow fertilize and produce the substantial image of a man. Her friends, no strangers to the prurient interests of the celibate, were cooperative.

"Well, he's a sort of dark version of the Prince of Wales, if you can imagine."

She pressed her lids together tightly. But the conjunction of "Prince of Wales" and "dark" produced only a mental photograph of Wallis Simpson, squinting in Mediterranean sunlight against a castle wall, her padded shoulders making her look like something hung out on the line to dry. She could see every detail of her costume, but the Prince of Wales, fair or dark, refused to appear at her side. She practiced on other newsworthy couples—the Roosevelts, the Old King and Queen. The result was always the same. She saw a robust woman, with a hat like a casque, a padded bosom in front, a natural bustle behind, a parasol, every minute detail. But she could manage only a vaporous suggestion of the uniformed figure at her side.

Her best friend asked her anxiously, as if suspecting a sexual aberration, "Don't you like men?"

"Like them?" she replied, "I think I might. It's just that I can't imagine them . . . . "

"You never can ahead of time," said her friend briskly. "But you must meet my brother Aubrey. If you like me, you'll like him. We're identical twins, you know."

It was at this time that she resolved to marry, since all her efforts of will had failed. She felt she must trick her unconscious mind and intractable imagination into conceiving of a man. The best solution seemed clearly to marry one. She would live with him and throw herself wholeheartedly into the supervision of his life and his masculine paraphernalia so that she could not escape accepting him as a human being as firmly rooted in reality as any other.

Her mother, when informed of this plan, was horrified.

"What?" she said, "If you wind up married you'll have to learn to cook and keep house and you'll spend the rest of your days waiting on him hand and foot, cooking, shopping, catering, picking up and running after him and never a word of thanks for all you do oh no don't ever expect that let me tell you. . . ."

"Is that how you remember Daddy?" she asked.

"Nonsense," said her mother. "Your father was a man of honor. I speak of others. He'll have you washing and ironing and running errands and picking stuff up at the dry-cleaners, and nag! Don't ever let anyone tell you it's women that nag. You haven't heard anything till you hear a man nag nag nag from morning till night. And self-centered. Let me tell you—it's self self self, all the time."

She was quite prepared for all that her mother warned of and indeed it seemed to her auspicious. She could not believe that anyone so fractious as a man could not manage to jostle himself into the inner recesses of her consciousness and take root there. She looked forward to a time when, falling asleep at night, she might expect to meet one in her dreams.

The wedding itself was like a dream. It took place in a large cathedral dedicated to a female saint. Six bridesmaids handled the long train and there were flower-girls, ring-bearers, bridesmaids, pipers and drummers in kilts and choirs in flowing robes. There were flowers and bottles of champagne, a white-tiered wedding cake and showers of confetti like snow-storms in mid-summer. Boxes of presents arrived day after day. Looking back, she remembered Aubrey's voice saying, "What are we

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going to do with all this stuff?" But mostly she failed to notice him, and later, long after it was over, when he referred to "that ridiculous wedding," she asked him inadvertently, "Oh, were you there?'

Once the wedding had receded and they were living together at last, everything fell out exactly as her mother had prophesized. Every day her husband went into the city and every evening he came home and nagged. He said, "Look I spend the whole day in the city. When I come home all I need is a drink and a little attention. Someone to talk to. I've had lunch with clients and I don't need a four course meal. Something on a tray will be fine but for God's sake, let's sit down and talk."

"Well," she said, "that's all right for you. But a big house like this makes demands on my time and energies. I'm often played out by six in the evening."

"Get help," he cried. "Get a housekeeper. Get a gardener. We can afford it. I didn't get married to have a domestic slave. I need companionship."

The sad fact was, she had not so far been able to imagine him. During the day, when he was in the city, she could not even recall what he looked like. When he returned home, she could not simulate any interest in him or his activities. Even in his arms at night she floated off into forgetfulness of him. In dreams, it did seem now that she was not alone but accompanied by another. But the other was a shadow, and often a woman. Not Aubrey, but Audrey his sister, who was still her dearest friend.

It must be admitted that they both tried. He worked as an editor in a large publishing house and he made efforts to interest her in his stable of writers. He spoke of the talented women authors with whom he lunched and, far from being envious or jealous, she happily imagined them and clearly saw their beringed fingers, their gigantic hats, heard their flutey voices and their trills of laughter. She read with great interest the copies of their latest books that he brought home. But then, the women authors were such a minority and most of his clients were men. When he spoke of them, she yawned, shifted her position and just could not concentrate.

Often they quarreled and she found their quarrels the most reassuring of all. He shouted very loud indeed for a mild-mannered man and even threw things. She hoped that, if he continued his rages, she would eventually come to believe in his existence, because they focused her attention as nothing else did. Yet, he seemed, even in his furies, more poltergeist than man. "Attention" was always a key word in the rows. She explained this to her mother, who wondered why the wedding presents were all smashed to smithereens. Her mother said, "Oho. Don't say I didn't warn you. That's men all over, the wild rampaging brutes. Notice me, admire me, bolster me, bolster my ego. Those great throbbing egos of theirs attract all the attention like the pull of gravity."

She closed her eyes, trying to envisage a man with a great ego. The ego itself took shape in her mind as a disembodied organ, like a red heart, throbbing and pulsating, inflating and deflating itself, but the man never appeared. Alas, familiarity with Aubrey did not breed contempt. It did not breed anything at all. And when he disappeared she forgot that she had ever been married in the first place. Every morning when she picked up her mail by the door, she was momentarily surprised to see her married name, for the whole episode had already slipped her mind.

The house ran on rather more smoothly than before. She polished up the Victorian rosewood dining table which he had complained was too low for a man, and she heaped again the coffee table and end-tables with the bric-a-brac that he had broken by accident or design. He had created a wake of devastation that had done everything except make him seem like a credible human being, alive and present. Since the house was rather large for one person, her mother eventually joined her, and they lived together peacefully and quietly. The house was a cocoon of female security. Even the plants were feminine—twining ivies, maiden-hair ferns, flowers with trumpets to lure the probosces of the absent bees, Venus fly-traps and aspidistras in brass pots that survived all their owners' anxious over-attention.

When, in the fullness of time, her mother died, she felt that she was living in a house of ghosts, so vividly did her mother's memory inhabit the house. Coming in from the garden with armfuls of early forsythia, she could plainly see her mother coming downstairs in her kimono to meet her. Blinking, she realized painfully that her mind was playing tricks on her. Stepping in the twilight through the French windows, she saw the familiar grey head in the rocking chair and she took again full account of her loss and desolation, and knew that she herself was getting old.

And so, at last, incapacitated by age and loneliness, she went to spend her declining years in a home for ailing gentlewomen, mostly the widows and daughters of the clergy, left in impecunious circumstances. They were all old women, sitting together, remembering the past.

"I never married and sometimes I think I missed a great deal," said her friend who was the sister of a Canon.

"I married," she said, "and I sometimes think I missed a great deal."

"But, after all, what is marriage without children?" said the Canon's sister.

Since the married women in the home had all survived their husbands, there were rarely any male visitors. Only the Canon came regularly to visit his sister, who had been his housekeeper and amanuensis. The matron always rushed obsequiously to greet him, since he was not only a man but a man of the cloth. His jocular voice could be heard booming along the corridors and bouncing off the antiseptic walls. His dark shadow passed by her doorway, for now she was enfeebled and unable to leave her room.

For all this, her last years were peaceful and her life ebbed gently away. Looking through her windows she could hear the bitterns booming on the Pevensey marshes and she could hear Moaning Minnie, the fog-horn in the English Channel. Although her eyesight had almost gone she could still vividly sense the changing seasons. She heard the cuckoo and the mourning dove and knew that spring was near. Spring came o'er the lea and (although she had never ascertained the meaning of that word) she saw her clearly in her mind's eye and knew just how she looked and how the lea looked.

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She was now about to draw her last breath.

As chance would have it, the drawing of her last breath coincided with one of the Canon's visits. The staff was preoccupied with his arrival, although she herself was too concerned with her death to be aware of his booming and striding in the corridor. She lay alone, drawing the breaths before the final one, feeling her toes twinge slightly as *rigor mortis* was trying to set in, and hardly noticing the rattling in her throat.

The Canon, however, had walked much with death and when he heard the rattling, he knew at once what she was about, and what he must do. Striding manfully into her room, he took from his pocket the Book of Common Prayer, although the occasion called for a prayer that was far from common. Distracted as she was by the exigencies of her body, she had neither the presence of mind to avert her eyes, nor to withdraw her attention as he stood before her offering Extreme Unction. He stood at the foot of her bed and she gazed and gazed upon him, as if she had been waiting all her life to receive him thus in her presence. He was clothed entirely in black, save for his white clerical collar. His eyes were coal-black and his hair was sleek and dark and he read from his little black book with the gold lettering. The silence in the corridor was pregnant.

"The Lord is my shepherd," announced the Canon, "I shall not want."

"I am the Resurrection and the Life," cried the Canon.

"Oh Death, where is thy sting?" demanded the Canon, in his authoritative voice, glaring around the room.

"Oh Death where is thy sting?" the question echoed in her mind. And she knew that Death was about to take her away. And she imagined not a wasp, nor a bumblebee, nor a hornet with a vicious sting. But she knew that Death wore a black suit and a sly look. She knew that he was a man, and that she had seen him and recognized him, and was ready to go with him, wherever he might lead. □

MARTIN McGOVERN

LATE SPRING, ELEGY, EARLY JUNE

Spoon bread, black bread,
my first remembrance of words.
The cherry tree, its slick red planets
revolving under the envy of crows.
My brother and I. My mother
in her pedalpushers, passing around jams.

This season is mostly their season,
these companions, these I took bread with —
my mother a little to the side,
slightly abstracted, my brother on the grass,
playing in rhythm with the tree chimes
in a language half his own making.

The lilac bush, branches pillowed
against brick. My mother clipped lilac stems
and flayed the ends into shapes of horns,
tamped those thin veins firmly down
to tame the green reeds into sound —
bugle, flugelhorn, flute.

Rain-weighted lilac, blue congregation.
How many years, and my mother locks the door,
my brother, darker, on the porch,
naked, his work clothes balled up in his hands.
Bread of light. Bread of confusion.
So alone a single word could break him.

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The Middle Dominions

DAVID HELLERSTEIN

to the memory of Robert Fitzgerald

Since my room has been destroyed—or more precisely, invaded—my wife and I stay in my sister's room. My room's in the attic, under the eaves, and on past visits we've pulled out a rollaway from the closet and stayed there in splendid isolation. But now it's been occupied by an insurrection of the past, a revolt of memory, a deluge of dead objects and their live auras of association; what was previously shelter to only one family, to my own possessions and those of my father, since my room doubled as his study, has now been taken over by Feils, Cohens, Elgutters, Rosewaters, Steins, by Omaha, St. Louis, Denver, Cleveland, five generations of the Midwest. Packets of letters and financial records, white boxes of lingerie and tablecloths, medical books, silver, lamps, baskets, ancient hatboxes from Saks and Macy's holding mummified hats from the '30s and '40s, are piled around the room, on the floor, on chairs, on my desk by the window. My bed is covered with shoeboxes full of letters and postcards, a vintage collection of annotated cookbooks, by sheaves of unframed oil paintings by my great-grandmother, who died giving birth to my grandmother; and on the pillow rests a huge metal cracker tin full of photographs of unlabeled faces, a thousand unruly ghosts.

So we sleep, my wife and I, in my sister Kathy's room on the second floor, which usually is occupied by Beth, who for this occasion has doubled up with Susan. (If only Jon's room hadn't been filled by boxes of junk displaced from *my* room, Beth could have had some privacy). On creaky maple-wood beds, we toss and turn, sleeping little. I wake early, smelling my sister's perfume in the pillow, seeing yellow wallpaper, behind which a hundred pink ballerinas turn, pirouette, plié. The beds are soft, lumpy, the walls are crowded with photos, the shelves with ceramic dogs and horses, buttons and decals, and trophies for softball, field hockey, basketball; the mirror is tucked with photos of athletic Ohio boys.

I should explain.

We're home for the long weekend, my wife and I, a yearly visit to the city that's tired of being Cleveland. This time it's more than a ritual, though; this time it's to stake a claim. My grandmother has long since died, my grandfather's in a nursing home, my brother and *his* wife bought their house last year, moving objects that had lain undisturbed for three-fourths of a century. Relatives convened, argued, laid claim to carved chairs and leatherbound Shakespeare, to Warshofsky paintings, Whistler etchings, to Twain and Osler first editions, to silver, pearls, diamond cocktail rings. They divided, made truce, dispersed, and what was left over was crated and shipped to my parents' house, a mile away. Which explains why there are four sets of dining-room chairs in one house. And forty-seven volumes of Balzac and eighty of Voltaire, in French, by the front stairs. And why we can barely walk into my attic room.

What do I want? Not much. Some books, sure. Some standing lamps. A marble-topped curly-maple bureau that belonged to my grandmother's great-aunt. And, requiring most delicate negotiations, one set of dining-room chairs. This should be simple. A set of four (not even six or eight, only four, since our Manhattan apartment is small) oak chairs, to go around the oak table my wife and I bought in Nyack, N.Y., stripped of old varnish, restained and waxed. Four oak Windsor chairs. Surely it'll reduce the clutter at home, surely one of four sets won't be missed. Or so—after catching up on family business, the health of aunts and the marriages of cousins, the weekend schedule—so I begin to tell my mother on the drive back from the Playhouse Saturday night. We bought one-way tickets, I tell her, we've reserved from Avis, we'd like, if you don't mind, to drive a few things back to New York. Would that be all right?

We're going through University Circle then, my father driving, my mother beside him, my wife and I in the back seat, passing the motley collection of university buildings, and there's a long, odd pause. *Well*, my mother says, we'll have to see. Maybe someone else . . . What? I say. Maybe someone else will want them, she says. There's plenty of other things to go around, I say, suddenly irritated. Mary, for Christ's sake, my father says, of course they can have the chairs.

And in silence, in darkness, we drive up Cedar Hill. A smoothly curving road, rising up what is the first foothill of the Alleghenies, the first wrinkle of a huge carpet of earth covering the buckled sandstone of Ohio, the bituminous hills of Pennsylvania, rippling through upstate New York, joining the mountains of New England. Above us, on the brow of the hill, in one of the old villas which has had a huge, almost-tasteful brick and concrete facility grafted on, sits my grandfather, ninety-five, wheelchair-bound, the emeritus professor of medicine.

Your mother never knows how to throw anything out, my father says. Of course you can have them.

Those chairs, says my mother, they were in my father's office, in his waiting room, for fifty years. They're not really dining-room chairs.

They'll do fine as dining-room chairs, my father says.

I sit in silence, until we pull into the driveway at home.

We're all doctors here, just about. We're eating dinner, my father the heart doctor at one end of the dining room table, my mother the child doctor at the other, and between, me (the brain doctor), my brother Dan, training to be a urologist—"a pecker-checker," he calls it, "a weiner-

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cleaner''—and Susan, finishing medical school, who may become a gynecologist, and Beth, who may become a geologist, a "rock doctor," but more likely will follow everyone else to medical school and then search the human body for an organ to call her own. Not everybody is here—Kathy, the "book doctor," the professor of English, is in Chicago, Jon, the only non-doctor, the environmental scientist, is in Minnesota, with his wife, the nurse. But with those of us sitting around this table you could staff a reasonably-sized clinic, covering most specialties. And if you brought in cousins, uncles, aunts, in-laws, grand-uncles, great-grandfathers, you'd have enough for practically a whole hospital. I've often thought of that: an imaginary clinic, staffed entirely by members of our family, a Hellerstein Health Center. Competition for the Mayos, the Menningers. I'm not sure if the thought gives me comfort or the willies.

Now as we eat, a million things are going on. I'm talking about my fellowship at Columbia, Sue's talking about her upcoming trip to study obstetrics and gynecology in China, Dan's telling us about his call schedule in surgery and the condo he may buy, and my father's talking about research, Reagan and World War II.

"I never got anything new," Beth says, expounding on her plight as the youngest of six. "I always had to get hand-me-downs."

"That's right," Dan answers. "You even got a used placenta."

"What?"

"You know, when you were *born*. . .a second-hand placenta."

"That's *disgusting*."

"*Ni how*," Susan is saying. "*Ni how*." Chinese for something or other.

"So his securities are only bringing in 2% or 3%," my father is saying. "It's insane, Mary, what your father's lawyer is doing. He's a very genteel WASP of the old school . . . "

"Who? Papa?"

"No, his lawyer. And he doesn't see any need to invest in anything with more of a return. Plus, as we well know, everything over $300,000 will be taxed at 50% at the time of . . . Why don't we disperse the assets? Ask your mother."

"*Ni how! Ni how!*" Dan's mocking Susan.

Beth is debating whether she should spend next year teaching mathematics in D.C. or working in a primate laboratory in Oregon. Or recombine DNA in Maine. Or go on a geological expedition.

"I should write a novel about this crazy family,'' I say. Nobody answers.

"Well, Susan always calls it the North Coast. It's not the Midwest, it's the North Coast, right Susan?"

"And of course, you know your grandfather's stepfather was a doctor? Gustav Feil, he was a general practitioner in Cleveland. Think how long ago that was. And your grandmother's grandmother was born in New York City, on East 24th Street, in 1845. I've been finding out all kinds of things from going through the Feil records. And now I know why your mother never could throw anything out."

"Herm," says my mother.

"How do you say 'take a deep breath' in Chinese?"

"Have you seen how fast the Cleveland Clinic is expanding?"

"The clinic that devoured Cleveland."

"You should see what Jon and Peggy have done to the house. They stripped all the wood and brass in the pantry. It's really lovely . . . "

My mother leaves, comes back in with a birthday cake, candles lit, and everyone's singing happy birthday to me. I'm thirty-one today, I forgot.

" . . . to you."

"Last time she brought home a Frenchman. This time I'm afaid she'll bring home a . . . "

"Dad, *please*!"

"Blow out the . . . "

"Make a wish."

Beth puffs up, but I blow them out first.

"Remember how Jonny blew out Kathy's candles?"

"And she started crying?"

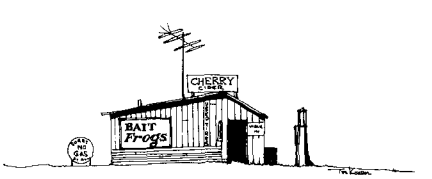
The doorbell rings. It's Susan's date, an athletic boy who has been doing graduate studies in Hamburg. My father sits him down for cake and a lecture.

"Why the war began? Well of course, as Bismarck said . . . "

"Do you want some ice cream?"

Cake is cut, passed around.

"And I was in Normandy in the Seventh Armored Division . . . "



"Can you believe it?" I whisper to my wife; she smiles.

"On the battlefield, I treated two thousand nine hundred and thirty-seven servicemen . . . "

"*Approximately*," Susan and I say simultaneously.

Everyone laughs.

"Don't laugh. It was the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century. The Germans saw the red crosses on our helmets and began firing at our heads. The bastards! I fell to the ground. Eight out of nine medics in my unit were killed instantly. I was the only one who survived. *I survived.* You easily might not *be* here."

"Oh, not again."

"If Hitler . . ."

"*Ni how*."

Excavations in attic room, a preliminary report.

Books by relatives:

Easy Millions, by Frank Rosewater.

'96: A New Utopia, by Frank Rosewater. Nutty great uncle, a utopian capitalist, printed them himself. Forgotten plans for social perfection.

The Liberty Bell, by Victor Rosewater. Title says it all.

Backstage in 1912, by Victor Rosewater. How Roosevelt was defeated in Republican primary, Taft selected, the stage set for Wilson's election, by Republican great uncle.

Gourmet Cooking for Cardiac Diets, by Florence Field. Grandmother's recipes for long life, strong heart; pen name to shield from publicity's glare.

Old Nic and Nicotine, by Dr. Nathan Rosewater. 1926 or thereabouts, self-printed. Dangers of smoke. One drop of nicotine will kill a tabby cat.

Also: grandfather's adoption papers.

One coin collection, still unpillaged (mine).

"Archaeological Discoveries in the Midwest United States." Eighth grade paper. Indian mounds, arrowheads, pottery shards.

Notebook of bridge scores, 1957.

An enormous album of photos and clippings and dance tickets, Smith College, 1915.

Cleveland College of Medicine yearbooks, 1912-1916, grandfather smiling in Glee Club.

Extremely interesting things about my mother and her two brothers, scattered throughout.

So of course we go out driving. What

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else is there to do in the Midwest but read and dream and wait for something to happen, or go for a ride? Anyhow I need a new driver's license. God knows why I don't get it in New York, why I come back to Ohio every four years to renew, but Saturday we come too late, and Motor Vehicles is closed. Monday, the 31st, it's open. We dash through the rain at Golden Gate Shopping Center, I stand in the long line, have a picture taken, which shows me dreamy, dazed; we stop by Forest City to copy a key; then we go driving. My wife indulges me in these drives through Cleveland, assuming they arise from boredom or restlessness—but she's a New Yorker, she couldn't understand. To be in Ohio *is* to drive, and one drive around the city fades into another. The best conversation in Ohio occurs in cars, just as in Paris it occurs in cafes, or in New York in windowless rooms. Driving is the art form of the Midwest: the car is to the Midwesterner what a movie camera is to a Californian, a pen to a New Yorker, a gun to a Texan.

So where do we drive? Well, first out in the country, out by County Line Road, and down to the half-frozen Chagrin River, then we loop around and take Fairmount downtown, passing my grandparents' house, and then down into the Flats, up a winding hill, past Soldiers and Sailors Monument on the Public Square, where a huge new building is going up opposite the Terminal Tower, a broad-shouldered silhouette—and then, on another drive, later that afternoon, we're in the same spot again, and my father is with us, and he starts talking about the van Sweringen brothers who built the Terminal Tower, *antisemites*, and how ironic it is that a Jew now owns it, and then he tells me to turn up a sidestreet off Carnegie, and suddenly we're at Cedar Road—not the broad, majestic Cedar that goes past my parents' house but a smaller, narrower road flanked by clapboard farmhouses, their rickety porches caving in, paint scaling off—and it's as if we're in a time warp, transported back a hundred years, but then I realize that the road is real, that it was cut off in the building of University Circle, and that these little farmhouses *are* in the city, sequestered by that bypass, awaiting an unlikely resurrection, and then we stop, somewhere in the East 50s, and my father says, *well*, your mother's father grew up around here, maybe in that very house, you saw the address on the adoption paper, didn't you? And then we're going again, turning off Euclid, down a curved river drive built by the Rockefellers before they deserted Cleveland for New York, and then we suddenly come out near the Lakefront Airport, and see the steely, deserted face of Lake Erie, pushed half a mile away by landfill, away from this inward-facing town, and I remember the night we were coming back from Kelley's Island on the ferry, and a storm hit, and the waves were so big that I was afraid our whole family would be flipped off the boat, into the whitecaps. And I think of the map that a friend of my wife's family, a map-dealer, gave us as a wedding present: "A New and General Map of the Middle Dominions Belonging to the United States of America," it reads, "London, 1794." It shows a bare stretch of land on the south shore of Lake Erie, a territory marked for white clay, coal and whetstones, for salt licks and portages and "Antique Sculptures," Indian mounds, and the dominions of various tribes: the Wiandots, the Myamis and the Shawanese, and on the lake, only a few miles west of here, the legend reads: "The Indians Cross the Lake Here in Canoes from Island to Island"—and none of this industrial city is here yet: none of the rusty smokestacks, none of the iron bridges, none of the highways, none of the rubber plants, none of the surburban houses or the slums, none of the gleaming, ever-expanding medical centers—only the land and the malarial waters of the Cuyahoga and Erie.

We stop at Russo's on the way home to buy steaks for dinner. It's raining, and it's getting dark, and when we pull into the back of the house I see piles of smooth-barked logs by the white brick wall, and odd blank gaps overhead where the two cherry trees used to be before disease and old age carried them off; two trees, one red, one white, fertilizing each other into bloom every spring, whose branches the birds and squirrels set jumping.

There are postcards from the Waldorf-Astoria and the Plaza, signed by my mother and grandmother, to "Harold and the boys" in Cleveland. The train to New York was unbearably slow, but we finally arrived and were met by Aunt Tess. We went shopping at Saks, Mary bought a stylish dress. We will be going to visit the Strausses, now that we have seen the Sackses and the Steins. Cousin Anabel called last night and was very insulted that we had not planned to see her, but, honestly Harold, I always feel that she wants to manage *every moment* of our trip (there is no need for Edward or George to see this) . . .

We sit on the living room carpet, to the mortification of our mother, sorting through packets of creamy white letters and hotel stationery, through postcards with 2¢ stamps, chronicling dozens of trips my mother took East with her mother, visiting classmates from Smith 1915 on their estates in Virginia, their townhouses in Boston, their apartments in New York. My mother goes for a wagonride on an estate in Connecticut, watching workers haying in the fields, she has a date with Calvin Coolidge's grandson ("he's not very good-looking"), she sends her laundry home from Smith by train so it can be properly done under our grandmother's supervision, she meets an English cousin who was adopted and raised by a French princess, who tells her all about "princesses and castles"—all in all, a whole life, a whole existence that none of us had suspected, something out of a James or Wharton novel. Then, surrounded by piles of letters, by postcards from Yellowstone, by references to The Crash, we come upon a formal-looking document, typed on crackly onion-skin. It's a report from summer camp, circa 1932, when my mother was 10, her brothers 12 and 6, signed by the director. It's extraordinary, he notes, for him to write an extended report, but the behavior of the Feil children has been so striking that he feels duty-bound to notify their mother. The counselors report that all 3 children are extremely difficult and uncooperative, do not play well with their peers. Mary is unruly and self-centered, she acts in a way she thinks will please others, trying for maximum effect . . .

"Look at this!"

Brothers and sisters gather around, we read through the document, chuckling over the camp director's portentous insights, his observations about Nellie and Harold's three headstrong children, we try to imagine their response to this unsolicited advice;

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we giggle, we read sentences mockingly, for effect; but then we turn, and see that our mother, in the chair by the fireplace, looks embarrassed and pale, as if she's seen a ghost. So we stop.

Beth folds the letter up again, and goes on to the next letters, which are about George's career at Yale, including one bridge game which was interruped by a telegram that arrived, saying that George could not advance to senior year until he submitted several overdue papers, and the next, a happier one, from one of the first visits to New York, Nellie with the three children, in which my mother's large handwriting informs her father that they were so excited by what they'd seen that "the whole family stayed up until 9:56 p.m."

Really, I guess, this all revolves around my mother.

She can never throw anything out, says my father, in his critical moments. Disorganized. Always late . . . pull yourself together, Mary, he says.

I used to wait for her at the Institute of Music, after my lesson, sometimes for hours. I'd stand on the front steps, holding the molded plastic violin case against my side, looking out at the cars whizzing by, at the ravine's dark falling off, at the lights of the Institute of Art and the Natural History Museum down the street; I'd go down to the snack bar in the basement, where the conservatory students would be sitting at metal tables, and buy a Planters Peanut Bar for a dime, and walk back along the long corridors, hearing from the practice rooms the intense passionate rills of music, muffled voices singing arpeggios, the scrape of violin bows. I'd come out front again, and wonder: has she come and gone without me? has she forgotten the day? has she been in an accident? (for once on Cedar Hill she rear-ended a woman who'd stopped by the Rapid Transit to let out her maid in a no-stopping zone, and she got whiplash, and wore a plastic neck-brace for months, and the Corvair was totalled) . . . or did she just forget? And finally, after an hour or more of waiting, finally the white Rambler station wagon would appear, crowded with brothers and sisters and brown bags of groceries and plastic-shrouded drycleaning and white and blue boxes from Hough Bakery, tied in white string, holding donuts and angel-food cake, and the door would open, my mother saying: Sorry! Sorry I'm late, I've been in a tizzy all afternoon, I'm running late, come on, hop in! And I'd push my way into the crowded car, vowing never to practice my violin again, never to play another note, angry, so angry I'd want to cry, but at the same time secretly relieved.

Maybe that's what I want to exorcise, maybe that's what makes these visits home, these discoveries, so discomfiting: they recall those angry, lonely waits in the darkness at the Institute of Music, as car after car drove up, as mothers called to children, as violins, cellos, flutes, clarinets disappeared from the circular drive, as the lights inside began to go off . . . That boy greets me each time I come home to Cleveland, as if I too have been away too long.

New Year's Day, at the Oakwood Club, we have it out. We're there for brunch, the whole family, including grandfather and cousins, about twenty of us at a big circular table. I'm wearing a blue blazer borrowed from the maître d' ("that's the club rule, all gentlemen must wear jackets," he told me at the entrance, and after a long pause admitted he might have a "loaner": "just leave a fiver in the breast-pocket," smiling). Oakwood's the fancy club, for old German families, like my mother's side; my father, being Russian, is vaguely suspect, an arriviste.

"You think *this* is cold?" Aunt Mimi is saying. "I have this Canadian girl working for me now, it gets so cold up where she's from that you have to start your car every three hours all winter. . .she fell asleep one night in January and couldn't start her car again until May."

In two hours we start back for New York.

"So, Mom," I say. My mother's sitting next to her father, cutting his blintzes into little pieces. She looks up, fork and knife poised. "What's the answer?"

"To what?"

"Can we take the chairs or not?"

"Well," she says. "Are you sure they're right for you?"

"Yes," I say definitively.

ELAINE EQUI

CRIME AND THE CLASSICS

That the wages of sin
are Dickens and Melville
is what I learned from TV
where the teacher says,
"Roberto, put the switchblade away
and read aloud for us."
And the warden says,
"These punks are not creative,
if they were, they would be robbing banks
instead of 7-11's.
What they need is good background."
So class is moved
to the prison library
where, while awaiting trial, our hero
reads all the great books of the Western World
but gets the chair anyway.
It is later than the late show for him,
dear reader,
but for you, the choice
between book or movie still remains.
Please, weigh it carefully.

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"They'll be fine. But I don't want to take them unless it's okay with you."

"It's okay with me."

"You sure?"

"Yes," she says. "But . . ."

"But what?"

"Well, are you sure there are enough of them?"

"There's four. I counted. Two in the attic, one in Jon's room, one on the screen porch."

"And that's enough?"

"I'm telling you, Mom, that's all we have room for."

"Okay." A few minutes later, after I come back with a second helping of knadlach, she says, "You know, Jon didn't want them because he said they're too creaky."

"Creaky?"

"Yes. They're very loose. They . . . I'm not sure how sturdy they are."

"I'll get some Elmer's Glue," I say. "Some of the legs are a little loose. But really they're sturdy."

"Oh," she says. "Then take them, I want you to take them."

"All right," I say.

"Thank God," says my father. "Now you'll have less to throw out when we die."

"*Herm*," says my mother.

But that's that.

After brunch we drop off my grandfather at the nursing home. From his window you can see out over Cleveland, the flat land, the narrow Terminal Tower, the hard new skeleton of the Standard Oil building which rises broadly beside it, the flat gray line of the lake. My grandfather argues with my mother. *Who's paying for this?* he says, gesturing around at his room, *this must be awfully expensive.* He doesn't remember who my wife is, or who I am, for that matter, but he doesn't want us to leave.

My father and I drive to the airport to pick up the car from Avis. My father is gone a long time; I wait in the car. Finally my father returns. I got you a Dodge van, one way, for the same price as the station wagon, he says, I thought the station wagon would be too small for those chairs. Yeah, I say, but they want a two hundred buck dropoff charge for the vans, I checked. No dropoff charge, my father says. None? I say. Nope, he says. How'd you do that? I say. The van belongs to Maine, my father says, I told the fella we're doing a favor by getting it back as far as New York. And he bought that? I say. My father smiles.

So I follow him in the van back to the house, and I pull the big maroon van up the driveway, leaving a muddy streak on the lawn where I didn't turn hard enough, and then we bring the chairs down, and the lamps and the bureau, whose marble top we wrap in old mattress-pads, and the books, and our stuff, and then we kiss everybody goodbye and take off for New York.

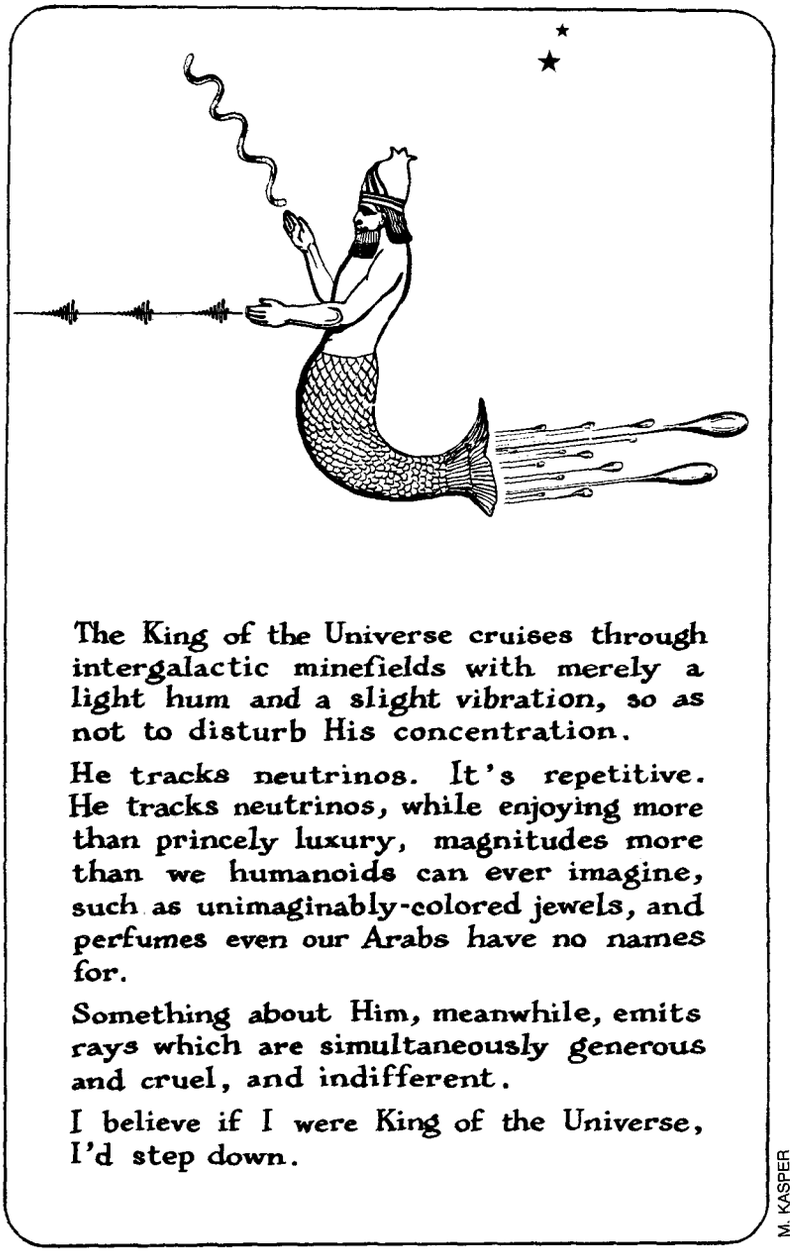
It's really cold, but there's no snow. We listen to the radio, and sing along to some of the '60s songs, and pretty soon we're in Pennsylvania, up in the low rolling hills, coal country, then we're in the Alleghenies. "Endlefs mountains," my map calls them. We pass cars from Michigan, from Indiana ("Wander" is the motto on the license plate), and it's a nice view from a van, higher up than the average car, so you seem to be flying at a low altitude. We pass several tractor-trailers piled with fresh new cars from Detroit, heading East, and we eat the sandwiches my mother packed, the carrot-sticks and celery, the Hydrox cookies.

We get to New York around midnight; we double-park and lug everything downstairs, through the basement to the service elevator, and up to the apartment. The chairs look really great with the dining table, don't they, I say to my wife. Perfect, she says.

At Avis, none of the clerks can believe that we don't have to pay the dropoff charge. I point to the contract—it says right here. There's nothing they can do.

Your father, my wife says.

A few weeks later, my older sister calls from Boston.


The King of the Universe cruises through intergalactic minefields with merely a light hum and a slight vibration, so as not to disturb His concentration.
He tracks neutrinos. It's repetitive. He tracks neutrinos, while enjoying more than princely luxury, magnitudes more than we humanoids can ever imagine, such as unimaginably-colored jewels, and perfumes even our Arabs have no names for.
Something about Him, meanwhile, emits rays which are simultaneously generous and cruel, and indifferent.
I believe if I were King of the Universe, I'd step down.
M. KASPER

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Did you hear what happened to Mom? she says.

No, I say.

Dad didn't call you?

No, I haven't talked to them since New Year's. I've been meaning to call . . . What happened?

She was in an accident, but she's okay.

What?

On Cedar Hill.

What happened?

Well, you know how the middle lanes change from up to down, depending on the time of day? she says. Well, she was driving in the middle lane, and she went around a turn and ran head-on into someone coming up the hill. Mom had the right of way, it was the other lady's fault, she was an old lady, about eighty, maybe she didn't see the arrows.

And?

Well, she was alive when the ambulance got there, but she died the next day in the hospital.

She died, I say.

Yes.

How awful, I say. How's Mom reacting to it?

She was shaken, bruised up, the car's totalled. But I think she's okay.

I better call them, I say.

So I do, and she is okay, as far as I can tell. She really doesn't have much to say about it, which doesn't surprise me. That's her way. She wants to know how the chairs look in our apartment.

Great, I say, they're fine, they don't squeak at all. They're really beautiful, you'll have to come and see them, they're perfect. But tell me, I say, you're really okay?

And that night, as I'm trying to sleep, all I can think of is my mother on Cedar Hill. It's almost as if she ran into herself on the hill, it seems to me, as though the usual laws of time and motion were in abeyance as she drove, that she was in some middle dominion in which everything is simultaneous and collisions occur every moment: that the woman she ran into twenty years ago at the Rapid Transit stop was somehow herself at another moment, on another day, that the absent-minded eighty year old woman ignoring the arrows overhead was the same woman as was coming down around the next turn with the full right of way; that all of us, half a dozen generations, dead or alive, coming up or going down, are rounding a curve on Cedar Hill. □

LETTERS

Freud Again: Possibilities and Pessimism

To the Editor:

Professor Frederick Crews ("Freud and 'Social Mischief,' " *Letters*, March 1985) and I agree that Freudian psychoanalysis is, if taken as a science, rather poor science. After that, we radically diverge. The divergence concerns whether or not the bulk of Freud's output should be considered as something other than science.

Most may agree that matters of classification are not themselves either true or false. They are difficult to argue for or to defend, because they tend to be part of the unanalyzed equipment that one brings to the task of analysis. I have studied the Crews letter, and I still feel that my suggestion—that the heart of the Freudian work is a set of generalized intuitive insights—merits attention.

I was somewhat surprised to discover that Crews thinks it a simple matter to establish a work as "scientific." He says

> The [Freudian] hypotheses are scientific because, quite simply, they purport to be statements of regularity in nature.

I should think that, at the least, some components of experimental design and method of verification would come into play in the definition of "science." A definition as non-discriminating as Crews' does not serve the reader of Freud at all well.

In his lengthy attack, Professor Crews proceeds to accuse me of being influenced by the hermeneutical advocates of psychoanalysis and by Janet Malcolm. To these charges, I plead guilty. I may be guilty as well of failing to stitch seamlessly together these two strands of contemporary psychoanalytic construal. What I suggested was that psychoanalysis, if not mainly "science," might yet be salvageable as a form of myth, a myth that could encounter the inner myth of the sick in a way that could contribute to the cure of souls. I offered this possibility with a tentativeness that I do not find credited in Professor Crews' rebuttal.

Instead, Crews responds to my suggestion that psychoanalysis might have a little life left in it with the zeal of an inquisitor rooting out a heretic. He seems to feel that his (and Adolf Grünbaum's) reading of Freud as science has utterly destroyed the possibility of any competitive reading. Though the field has been reversed, Crews' anti-Freudianism comes off almost as fanatical and dogmatic as the fundamentalism of the Freudian inner circle. The zeal of the convert of negation may have contributed to his reading in my piece a similar dogmatic adherence to the hermeneuticians or to Malcolm. Such is not the case. I survey the field in "Freud Redux" and I think I see some possibility of a Freudian regeneration. I also mention some reasons for pessimism.

The last sentence of the Crews letter points a tendentious moral. Whatever its intrinsic weight may be, it lends a wholly different import to the preceding criticism of my essay. The tone is best conveyed by direct quotation:

> Perhaps [Thompson] should reflect that ideas actually bear consequences in the world—and that the sway of crackpot ideas tends to entail not just false pretensions *but social mischief as well.* (italics mine)

Setting aside the bizarre tone of avuncular condescension, I now grasp that Crews believes the real issue is a contest between neoconservative social philosophy and "permissive" liberalism. I disagree. But the presence of this ideological baggage goes some distance to explain the vehemence of his attack. It may also help to account for the thoroughly oracular rather than argumentative rhetoric of his letter.

I am unrepentant.

Thomas H. Thompson
Cedar Falls, Iowa

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Women and Role Models

ELIZABETH MAKOWSKI

> The absence of models in literature, as in life, is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect, even if rejected, enrich and enlarge one's view of existence.
>
> Alice Walker
> *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*

> The woman without an adequate role model is in a deep psychological quandary.
>
> Colette Dowling
> *The Cinderella Complex*

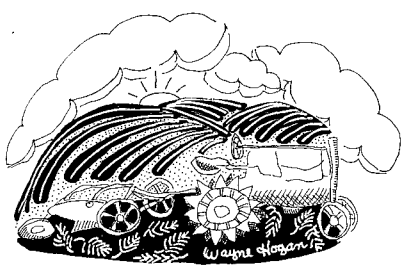
Reading Quentin Bell's *Virginia Woolf* in college I often turned back to the photographs. In most of them, formal portraits, Woolf sat abstracted, pensive and remote, heavy-lidded eyes staring or cast down at narrow slippered feet. In only one, a fuzzy holiday snapshot, did she seem almost joyful. There was the beginning of a smile on her lips. That one, I guessed, had been taken on request by some lesser sort, a villager, maybe a tradesman. "One has to be so cheerful with the lower classes," Woolf once wrote to a friend, "or they think one diseased."

Those were not the lines I'd seen so often quoted, the ones about £500 and a room of one's own. I had felt an immediate bond with the woman who wrote those lines. She was an iconoclast who reveled in the power of an aunt's legacy to substitute "for the large imposing figure of a gentleman . . . a view of the open sky"; a pragmatist, who knew the "infinite obscurity" into which poverty plunged most women. I had started Bell's biography because I'd needed to find out more about a woman heedless enough of popular opinion to counsel a life of 'selfish' independence. I had wanted the details of experience that I hoped might guide my own; information about those traits of mind and spirit that annealed and that had made it possible for Woolf, as a woman, to take the less-traveled path.

I found those traits in my reading, but always enmeshed in unfamiliar detail. The setting was high tea at the house on St. Ives, or an intimate Thursday evening in Kensington. There was debate about whether to summer at the manor house in Hampshire, or holiday in Seville instead. The "height of bliss," I learned, was not having to dress for dinner; chestnuts and chocolates at the drawing room fire were a source of consolation after an evening spent with "tedious fashionable people."

Increasingly, as Virginia Woolf's popularity grew and her admirers became more vocal, I found myself in an uncomfortable situation. I could relish the beauty of her prose and the passion of her sentiments, but I could not join those who regarded her as more than a literary master, who extolled her actions as well as her art, and who saw in her life a model for their own.

Modeling, behaviorists tell us, must take into account what the subject already knows. Each cue, sign, symbol or gesture, no matter how unique in combination, must be drawn from the observer's already familiar store. To succeed, a model must as closely as possible accord with the subject's own historical reality, and as a model for my own life, Virginia Woolf was just too different. An immigrant at eighteen, my grandmother had (gratefully) worked as a maid for years; by all accounts, Virginia Woolf had never learned to wash a sock, or make her own bed. Woolf had been denied access to Cambridge, but had studied Greek and literature and mathematics in her father's library. I was the daughter of working-class parents, neither of whom had completed high school. I was the very sort of person with whom one would have to be "so cheerful." Accidents of birth and breeding threw up obstacles to comprehension, much less empathy. I could not idealize Woolf's sorrow, or excuse her discomfiture. I could not even sympathize with her madness, given the leg-up that class and money had provided.



At the time, and for a long time afterward, I kept what I believed were my unworthy feelings a guilty secret. Admitting that I had problems identifying with Virginia Woolf seemed tantamount to betrayal. Feminist scholars had only begun to mine the past and to rediscover women of achievement. Growing up in the 'fifties, I had been presented with countless examples of female heroism; fine models, in literature and in life, of nobility based on care, compassion, and sacrifice—to God, if the women were saints; to the men they had transformed into gods, if they were not. For models of independent action in the "real world," there were men. Like other girls addicted to literature early on, I had some leeway. I became adept at changing the names of male protagonists; altering the pronouns. "It never occurred to me" I would testify later, "that *I* couldn't be Huck Finn, Charles Darnay, Stephen Daedalus. Yet the regular substitution of *her* for *him*, *she* for *he*, is ultimately wearing. It is accompanied by a lingering, if subliminal distrust: is the crossover "normal?" Was the Artist as Young Woman really a possibility, and, if so, who would play the always demure Emma Clery? Of course it was possible, they told us in college. I looked around. All my professors were men.

If she had had connections, been cosseted and cared for in a way that had allowed her élitism to flourish in spite of her great capacity for empathy, if she had never even had to get

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up to close the door on that room of her own, Virginia Woolf had at least known the importance of doing so. She had recognized the value of preserving the self, the authenticity of her spirit and view against the pulls and demands and diffusion of energies that were normally a woman's lot. Woolf was a professional, a writer, *and* a woman; proof that it was possible. I valued the work of those who had made her life story common knowledge. I had no wish to be labeled reactionary. I would never, I decided, make my feelings known. Gender alone, I knew, should confer compatibility; biology and a shared history of subjugation could override pulls of class or color. We were all really sisters under the skin.

Years passed before I discovered the words of Asian-American writer Nellie Wong, "angered by the arrogance" of those who told her that the white, privileged Woolf was her "spiritual mother," her possible role model. More years, before I read Cynthia Ozick's contention that the choice of Virginia Woolf as a "current women's movement avatar" was "inapposite and mistaken," and her confident claim that the whole notion of sisterhood and sameness, "a national social community grounded in biology and reproductive characteristics rather than in intellect or temperament or derivation or societal experience" might have occasioned, from Woolf, "a satiric turn."

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Alice Walker's most recent collection of essays, contains an account of the author's visit in 1974 to Flannery O'Connor's family home, Andalusia. A fellow Georgian, almost a neighbor, O'Connor had long been a literary idol whom Walker once "read endlessly, scarcely conscious of the difference between our racial and economic backgrounds." Yet, hearing that a caretaker was paid to keep up the fine, large, white house, enraged her. In Mississippi, no one knew, remembered, or apparently cared, where Richard Wright once lived. The care, the caretaker, became symbols of disinheritance; all that the white Southerner, O'Connor, had meant, diminished, although that diminishment was not willed. For years, Walker confesses, "I deliberately shut O'Connor out, feeling almost ashamed that she had reached me first."

Fortunately (for us all), Alice Walker did not permit her emotions to triumph. Recognizing that when she no longer read O'Connor, she missed her, realizing that although the rest of America might not mind, she could never be satisfied with a segregated literature, she decided not to abandon her, did not even assign her "alien status." At the same time, however, she continued to search for other, closer connections. Finding and then studying other black women writers, Walker discovered in all of them more immediate compatibility, and in one, Zora Neale Hurston, she found an abiding tie. Orphan and runaway, Barnard graduate and Guggenheim fellow; staunchly independent ethnographer and novelist (whose grave, until recently, lay unmarked and untended), Hurston's voice was so compellingly like her own that Walker devoted a great portion of her own time and talent to ensure that it would never be silent again. "We are a people," she writes, "and a people do not throw their geniuses away. If they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, if necessary, bone by bone."

The re-collecting of women of genius has gone on steadily for over a decade, and has produced remarkable results. Art historians, armed solely with Janson, can no longer deny the existence of Suzanne Valadon or Rachel Ruysch; even high school textbooks mention the contributions of Elizabeth Blackwell and Mercy Otis Warren, and biography, that richest substitute for personal experience, continues to focus on female subjects.

Writing in a recent *Times Book Review,* scholar and critic Carolyn Heilbrun notes that since 1970 she has added 73 new biographies of women to her library—about half of what had been published in that time, and a selection that did not include autobiographies, letters, journals or biographical essays. The numbers, she states, are disproportionate to any predictions; the upsurge of interest in "telling" women's lives extraordinary, and, furthermore, it shows no signs of abating. Inevitably, of course, Heilbrun adds, the bulk of biographer and reader attention continues to be given to the glamorous, the gifted—upper class, privileged women.

It comes as no surprise. Curiosity about the famous and the infamous is universal, it seems, and the life lived out in a single cork-lined room or a villa in Louveciennes, seldom fails to inspire interest. And the appeal of an Isak Dinesen or Zelda Fitzgerald, a George Sand or Vita Sackville-West, is not only inevitable, but also instructive. Alice Walker includes Nin along with Hurston, Colette as well as Nella Larsen, in her list of belatedly discovered brilliance. The achievement may be extraordinary, the experience unduplicatable, yet, as historian Albert Stone contends, lives of all outstanding women serve "to illuminate the many dimensions of feminine identity . . .," the life story of the most atypical among them, at the very least, confirming female complexity. By example, such lives can undermine inflexible stereotyped definitions of the self as woman.

The problem, of course, is that we have other selves as well—selves deeply influenced by the sometimes conflicting claims of race, class, ethnicity and economics. There are gaps that yawn almost as widely as those of gender, and what "inevitable" narratives about the rare and privileged cannot do, what it no longer seems disloyal to *claim* they cannot do, is bridge those gaps.

Biographies of the few, the rarified, not only fail to represent the experience of women at large, they devalue that experience. Would the achievement have been the same, lacking wealth or family position? Gains begin to appear serendipitous; the possibilities for the ordinary woman chimerical. To do more than satisfy our curiosity, to evoke sympathy, inspire pride, and, most importantly, to encourage emulation, the experiences of the women we read about, like that of those we see around us, must at least be comprehensible.

"Classical feminism as represented by Virginia Woolf" writes Cynthia Ozick, "meant one thing: access to the great world of thinking, being, and doing." As our daughters, as individuals, reach out to embrace that world, they merit as various a set of precedents as possible—notes on the great, yes, but also more about those "infinitely obscure lives" that Virginia Woolf herself longed to record. □

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The Region of Writing

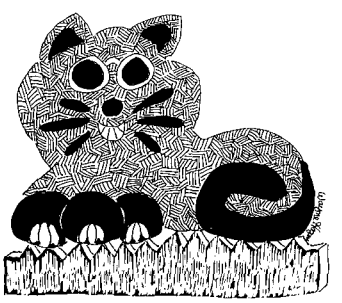
WELCH D. EVERMAN

C. J. Hribal, *Matty's Heart.* St. Paul, Minnesota: New Rivers Press, 1984. $6.00.
Jack Nisbet, *Sky People.* Mount Vernon, Washington: Quartzite Books, 1984. $5.95.
Carol Bly, *Backbone.* Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 1985. $6.95.

In many ways, regional fiction is a literary stepchild, and deservedly so. At its worst, regional writing appeals to only a limited audience—the people who happen to live in a particular region—and it does so solely on the basis of recognition. Every part of the country has its "local" authors whose works are based on "local color", on the history, the landscape, and the people of the area, and those same people read these regional works in hopes of recognizing their history, their landmarks, and perhaps themselves there. At this level, reading regional fiction is like going to a movie that was shot in your hometown in hopes of seeing Pete's Hot Dog Stand, Schreiber's Drug Store, and the local K-Mart in the background. Here, the background becomes the foreground. Seeing these familiar landmarks on the big screen or reading the familiar names and descriptions in print—and recognizing them there—makes them somehow more real than simply seeing them in day-to-day life.

Because this sort of regional writing is based on recognition, it must adhere to a strict realism. The reader who approaches the work already knows what it says because he knows the region. His pleasure comes not from discovery but from recognizing the landmarks, the events, and the people, even if the names have been changed or disguised. Apart from a few historical facts he may not have known, the reader does not hope to learn anything from the work or to play any part in the creation of it. The writer is expected to provide a textual window through which the reader can see exactly what he might expect to see if he turned away from the book and looked out his own window. Such regional fiction is designed to confirm what the reader already knows and to confirm the pride of place that he already feels.

On the other hand, regional writing at its best goes beyond recognition to creation. William Faulkner was a regional writer in this sense, as was James Joyce. Today, writers as different from each other as Donald Barthelme and Stephen Dixon are regional writers whose region happens to be New York City. At this level, regional writing is not rooted in the attempt to imitate people and places but to create them. The places may be recognizable, but the articulation of those places is new and open to discovery; it is not the region that is of primary importance but the writing. Here the landmarks and landscapes may be perfectly recognizable, but the reader who knows them in reality comes to know them again by collaborating with the author in their re-creation. The result is the creation of a new fictive world, not the repetition of the familiar one, and this new fictive world becomes the truth of the region at a level beyond simple recognition. It would, for example, be difficult for a reader of Joyce to visit Dublin and not see it through his own confrontation with Joyce's texts. In this sense, Joyce has *not* provided a textual realization of a recognizable Dublin that existed before he began to write. Rather, Dublin is as it is—now, in reality—



because Joyce has made it so, because he has created it in that form.

C. J. Hribal, Jack Nisbet, and Carol Bly are regional writers in this second sense. While not equally successful, all three are attempting to create textual regions that are somehow "true to" their chosen parts of the country—i.e., truer than the simple realism/recognition of other regional writing might be—precisely because their textual regions are fictive.

Hribal writes about rural Wisconsin and articulates that experience in a way that should be useful not only to residents of that region but to every reader. In his collection of short stories, *Matty's Heart,* Hribal's writing is strong and direct, and he manages to create a sense of a people and of a place with remarkable economy. In the title story, Matty herself delineates the place of the fiction:

> [F]or twenty-one years, I've been Augsbury's town clerk, working in the back of the town hall, in an office at the end of the short corridor which has the police station on one side and the volunteer fire department on the other.

The reader is encouraged to recognize this place and, at the same time, to see it again, to create it through the words of Matty. It does not matter where Augsbury really is or even *if* it is. It is here on the page, and it is up to the reader to use what Hribal provides to make it happen. The author is never condescending toward his characters or his region, nor is he particularly judgmental. Judgment is in the reader's hands.

The Matty stories in this collection are the strongest, no doubt because Matty is the perfect voice for her town, her fellow citizens, and herself. She is both an insider and an outsider. As a middle-aged widow who has always been there in the area and who knows everyone, she takes part in the life of the region. And yet, perhaps because of her status as town

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official and caretaker and her experience of rupture at the death of her husband, she is also an observer of regional life, even an observer of herself. She is a powerful and complicated character—both strong and weak, both hopeful and despairing—who wants more for herself but who has learned not to want more than she can get.

Hribal has an amazing ability to create characters in quick, broad strokes that allow the reader to come to know them—indeed, to create them—in much the way one might come to know and create a real person in one's own mind. Luther, who also narrates his own story in this collection, is a local farmer and Matty's suitor. He is always straightforward and to the point, as in the following:

> "Are we something regular?" he asks, his mouth working potatoes back so the words can come out.
>
> "I believe so," I say.
>
> "Good," he says and continues to eat.
>
> "Why do you ask?"
>
> "Time I got back to a normal schedule," he says.

This is Luther. But it would be too easy to read this dialogue as somehow tragic or to read Luther as uncaring. The relationship between Matty and Luther is simply what it is, and both of them know it. It is—between these characters and in this place—love. *Matty's Heart* is a well-written, intelligent example of regional writing at its best, for here C. J. Hribal offers a place that the reader can come to know and to care about precisely because it is a place that the reader and the author have created together, a place that never existed before.

Jack Nisbet's region is northeastern Washington State, and his first-person narrator comes to the territory as an outsider who hopes to become an insider. Thus, he is a good voice for the region and its people, because he must learn to belong to this place in the process of speaking about it—i.e., in the process of speaking it into being. In the earliest stories, the narrator—like the reader—is out of place. He brings his own preconceptions to the region and, therefore, he doesn't understand what is really important. He and his friend Mark make use of a professional dowser to help locate water on the land where they hope to build a home, but they aren't happy with the findings and

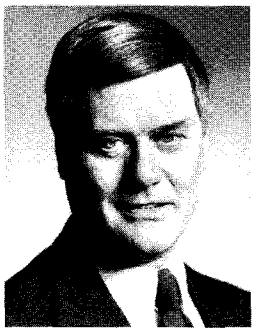
An advance note to our readers:

Effective December 1, 1985, the cover price of
The North American Review
will rise to $3.00, and the subscription price will become:

$11 per year in the United States;
$12 per year in Canada and Latin America;
$14 per year elsewhere.

While we're not pleased to be making this announcement, the sad fact remains that since the last increase (four years ago) our costs have risen at the rate of about six per cent each year, while our operating budget has remained constant. We will, of course, accept multi-year subscriptions at the present rate until December 1st.

"Good friends don't let good friends smoke cigarettes."



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decide not to follow the dowser's advice in drilling their well. To do so, they feel, would ruin the landscape. "He just cares about water," Mark says. "But I want a view." They soon learn that in the near-wilderness where they now live, water is far more important than aesthetics. In time, they have a house, but they also have "a water supply that vanished whenever there was a short dry spell."

Like Hribal, Nisbet has the ability to create a strong sense of persons by allowing them to present themselves. Jean, a local dairy farmer, offers himself and the character of his isolated region in a single statement: "I haven't been around much," he said, "but I've seen things where I've been."

Nisbet also creates a strong sense of place. In the story, "Raven Talk," he describes the local trash yard.

> It was ugly, and its fires were illegal and dangerous, but the dump was such an integral part of the local scene that I can't imagine the place without it. No burning regulations or toll-collecting shack marred the rummage-sale spirit of the Chewelah dump; it was open for business every day of the year, to any living organism hardy enough to find a place among the scavenging crowd.

The dump is the central character here, as essential to the area as woodlands and running streams. Whether or not there is such a place in Washington State is beside the point. In creating the dump, in giving it a voice, Nisbet gives a voice to the region and its people, for better or worse.

Sky People also presents the clash of cultures that both defines and disrupts the region. In this case, it is a clash between the life Nisbet's characters live and the mass media that project a life they can hardly imagine. Nisbet's narrator, as an outsider, is well attuned to this conflict. Here he presents the gap between history and the present—lived time as his characters know and remember it and processed television time that makes past, present, and future equal. His friend Ike is talking while watching a western on TV. It is the time of the Mount St. Helen's eruption.

> John Wayne got his wagons rolling again and Ike moved into a narrative about the two attempts of his parents to migrate west from Indiana. In 1902 they set out for California with all their belongings and Ike's grandmother in a wagon. They made it as far as Tucumcari, New Mexico, before the old lady died. Ike's mother went to pieces, forcing their return to the Midwest. Four years later, they set out again in the same covered wagon, and had almost made it to the Sacramento Valley when new volcano update letters ran across the bottom of the TV screen, leading to a video shot of a river choked with logs and running fast.

Like C. J. Hribal, Jack Nisbet is a strong regional writer who creates his chosen place by allowing the reader to take part in the work, to come to know the region and its people as he might come to know people and places in his own life. Carol Bly's strategy in *Backbone* is quite different. The narrator here is an omniscient outsider who speaks *of* rather than *through* the characters, and so, while Hribal and Nisbet's characters and places speak themselves into existence, Bly's narrative voice simply explains them.

The voice of Bly's fiction is an academic intelligence that comes to a small Minnesota town to watch and to criticize but not to become part of the region or to allow the reader direct access to the characters. Bly continually imposes images upon the region that belong to her own academic background but that do not belong in this fictive space. For example, she writes of a small-town, Midwestern sheriff who speaks a phrase "clearly, as sonorous as John Donne." Or again, in writing of a local festival: "Whatever communal dancing meant to Breughel, church carnivals don't mean that now."

Such writing is intended not to create a sense of place but to separate writer and reader from the region, to demonstrate that these people are *not* what we are. Therefore, we can spy on them, look into their minds. And this is precisely what Bly does. While Hribal and Nisbet allow their characters to speak themselves into existence, Bly merely tells us what her characters are thinking. There are no mysteries, nothing for the reader to do but accept what he reads. Even when Bly's characters do speak, they speak with her voice, in long-winded, impossibly poetic and introspective monologues and dialogues that separate readers from characters and characters from themselves.

> Jack thought, "I could just strangle him until those eyes jumped clear out of his head like twin pale spheres careening out into space and then I could pick him up and throw the whole mess of a man out the door."

These are "well-made" stories, contrived to establish and maintain a sense of distance, with Bly in complete control of the plot and everything else—including characters and readers. She touches all the correct political bases, but, unlike Nisbet, Bly cannot grant her characters the option of preferring water to aesthetics or a trash dump to a forest, even when such preferences would define them as unique if imperfect persons. Rather, she forces her politics upon them and judges them harshly if they fall short. Themes like ecology or C.I.A. intervention in foreign affairs seem artificially imposed on this rural Minnesota landscape, as if they were afterthoughts rather than integral elements in the stories. Bly is perfectly right in being concerned about such issues, but her stories sometimes read like made-for-TV movies that try to tackle every conceivable relevant topic in hopes of providing something for every viewer. Again, Bly is seeing her region—and forcing her readers to see it—through the eyes of one who reads Donne, enjoys Breughel, and holds the correct liberal views. Whether or not any of the characters in these Minnesota fictions also read Donne, etc., does not seem to matter. By setting herself and her readers apart from the region, Bly encourages us to look down from our heights on these people who are not like us.

There are strong moments here, moments that work. The story "Gunnar's Sword" deals with the conflict between the Scandinavian culture of the area and the mass culture of soap operas, and "The Dignity of Life" studies the contradictions between death viewed as a commercial industry on the one hand and a basic fact of existence on the other. But, for the most part, the stories are too pat, too complete. Bly leaves nothing for her readers to do. And she does not create a region and its people; she simply explains them away.

At its best, regional writing does not explain or imitate people and places that already exist in the real world. Rather, it creates them as fictions, in words. And, in doing so, the best regional fiction provides the words by which readers can articulate their own experiences and speak themselves and their own regions into being. □

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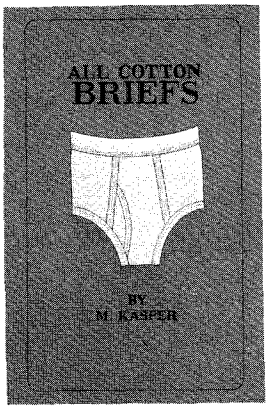

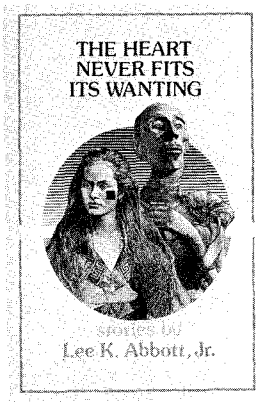

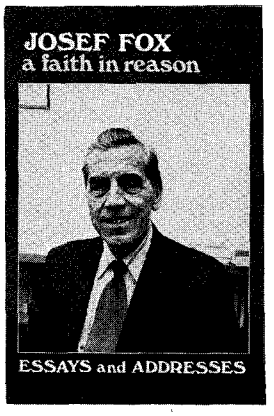

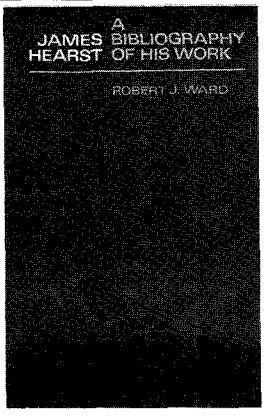

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